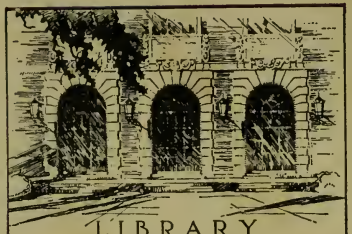

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MRS. ARTHUR.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"The Chronicles of Carlingford,"

&c. &c.

"Fie, fie! unknit that threat'ning, unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes.
. . . . . .
A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled."

TAMING OF THE SHREW.

"He breathed a sigh, and toasted Nancy!"

DIBDIN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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MRS. ARTHUR.

CHAPTER I.

"IS Mr. Curtis here?" said a voice at the door.

The door was so near the sitting-room that every demand made there was easily heard, and even answered from within; and, indeed, Mrs. Bates was in the habit of calling out an answer when it happened to be beyond the powers of the daughter or small servant who opened. But this question was one about which there was no difficulty. It was followed by a hearty laugh from the assembled family.

"I should think he was—rather!" said

Charley Bates, the son; and "Ask Nancy," said Matilda, the eldest daughter.

There was a considerable number of people in the little parlour—to wit, Mr. Bates in his big chair on one side of the fire, sipping rum-and-water, and reading a newspaper which was soft and crumpled with the usage of the day at the nearest public-house; and Mrs. Bates on the other, seated between the fireplace and the table, mending the stockings of the family. Charley was reading an old yellow novel behind his mother, and Matilda was making her winter bonnet with a quantity of materials in a large piece of paper on the table, which was covered with a red and green cloth. It was October, and not cold, but there was a fire, and a branched gas pendant with two lights, shed heat as well as light into the close little room. There was another daughter, Sarah Jane, who was coming and going about the table, now and then making incursions into the kitchen; and behind backs in the corner, on a black haircloth

sofa against the wall, were seated the pair of lovers. No one threw any veil of doubt on the fact that they were a pair of lovers —nor did their present aspect make this at all uncertain. They were seated close together, talking in whispers; one of her hands clasped in his, his arm, to all appearance, round her waist. Matilda screened them a little, having her back turned towards them, which gave, or might have given, a sense of remoteness to the pair, and justified their too evident courtship. Otherwise they were in full light, the gas blazing upon them; and it was scarcely possible to whisper an endearment which was not audible. *She* was a pretty girl, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pretty complexion, in a somewhat showy dress, cut very much in "the fashion," yet looking not at all out of place in the warm, crowded, stuffy parlour, full of hot air and gas, and the fumes of rum-and-water. She was Mrs. Bates' second daughter, called Nancy, but

preferring to be called Anna, and engaged to a young gentleman who was a pupil of Mr. Eagle the well-known "coach," and had been for a year at Underhayes. He had been coming after Nancy Bates all that time, and at present they were engaged, and made love in the family parlour now that it was too cold to take long walks. Mr. Curtis preferred the walk, but Nancy liked the haircloth sofa. She was a good girl, and fond of her family, and she liked them to share her happiness. The family party were all moderately like each other, harmonious and happy, suiting their surroundings. There seemed nothing out of place among them, the bonnet-making, or the old yellow novel, or even the rum-and-water. But there was one great incongruity in the room, and that was the hero, the young lover, who certainly had no business there. He was dressed in an English gentleman's easy morning suit, a dress in which there is less apparent pretension than any in the world perhaps, but which shows very dis-

tinctly the condition of the wearer. His presence in the room put the whole place out of harmony; it made the stuffy comfort look squalid and mean; it rebuked the family ease and cheerfulness, the absence of all disguise, the frank family union. In his person another element came in, a something higher, which made all the rest more low. He was not the sort of person to sit with his arm round his *fiancée* in public, within reach of papa's rum, and mamma's joke. All the rest went perfectly well together; but he put everything in the wrong.

And the effect which he himself produced to every beholder, or would have produced had there been any beholders, was wrought upon himself by the sound of this voice at the door. It was a voice of modulation and tone different from anything here. Even his Nancy, though he was so much in love with her, young Curtis felt suddenly jarred and put out of tune by it; he dropped her hand

instinctively, and got up confused, a sudden flush coming over his face.

"It is some one for me," he said, in sudden embarrassment. And again the family laughed more loudly than before.

"Any child could tell that, seeing as he's just asked for you," said Mrs. Bates; "and I'm sure any friend of yours is welcome. Find a chair for him, girls, if there is any chair free of your falals—and show him in, Sarah Jane."

"I think not; if you will excuse me I'll go to him," said the young man, hastily. "I might bring him—if you are so kind—another time."

"There's no time so good as now," said Mrs. Bates. "Don't be shy, don't be shy, my dear. You don't like him to find you with Nancy; but, bless my soul, the time won't be long that anyone will see you without Nancy—"

"Oh," said Nancy herself, saucily, "if he's ashamed of *me*—"

"Ashamed of you, darling! as if that

was possible," said the young man, stooping to whisper to her; "but it is a man, a college friend—I must go."

While he stood thus explaining, with an anxious face, and his Nancy pouted and tossed her pretty head, the stranger suddenly appeared at the open door.

"This way, this way!" Sarah Jane had cried, delighted by the advent of another gentleman, and already wondering why Nancy should have all the luck, and whether one wedding might not bring another.

The new-comer was tall; he was short-sighted, with a pucker on his forehead, and a glass in his eye. He stood in the door, and hazily regarded the scene, not penetrating it, nor finding out his friend for the moment; but gazing somewhat vaguely, dazzled besides by the sudden light, into the small crowded space and the group of strange faces.

"Ah, there you are, Curtis," he said at last, with a gleam of recognition; then

turned to Mrs. Bates with an apology. "I hope you will forgive such an intrusion. I had a commission to Curtis, and I did not understand—I did not know—"

"Come in, Sir, come in," said Mrs. Bates; "don't think of apologies—we're very glad to see you. Sit you down, Sir, and if you've just come off a journey, say what you would like, and it shall be got for you—a drop of beer, or a cup of tea, or a glass with my good gentleman. You see he's making himself comfortable. And supper's coming in about an hour. You can hurry it up a bit, Sarah Jane," cried the hospitable mother, "if the gentleman has just come by the train."

"Thank you," said the stranger, sitting down on the chair that had been cleared for him; "nothing to eat or to drink, thanks—you are too kind; but I may wait till Curtis is ready. I have got something for you, Arthur," he said, turning again to his friend.

"Oh, have you?" said Curtis, dropping

back upon the sofa, beside his Nancy, as there was nothing else to be done; but he did not take her hand again, or resume his former position. He sat very stiff and bolt upright, withdrawn from her a little; but young men and young women do not sit together behind backs for nothing, notwithstanding the gaslight; and his air of withdrawal took an aspect ridiculously prudish, and called attention. The family Bates looked curiously at the stranger, and he looked curiously at them. Neither was much acquainted with the *genre* of the other, and on both sides there was a half-hostile interest which quickened curiosity. But Matilda and Sarah Jane were not hostile. Their curiosity was warm with benevolence. If Nancy had done so well for herself, why not they too? He had dropped into their hands like a new prey. Their eyes brightened, the energy of enterprise came into their faces. A gentleman is a fine thing to girls of their condition, far finer in promise than in

reality. The appearance of a second quarry of this kind turned their heads. Why should it not fall to one of them?

"You must have found it cold travelling, Sir," said Matilda, wrapping up her bonnet in the paper. "October nights get chilly, don't they? and Underhayes is a miserable little place if you have come from town."

"I have come from the country," said the stranger, with his short-sighted stare. He was slightly annoyed, to tell the truth, to hear it so clearly set down that he must have come from town. Did he look like a man to come from town in October?—not thinking that town meant everything that was splendid in Matilda's eyes.

"Chilly!" cried Sarah Jane, eager to recommend herself. "I'm sure the gentleman thinks this room a deal too hot. Shouldn't you say so, Sir? I can't abide it; it gives me such a headache."

"Come, girls, you needn't quarrel," said Mrs. Bates, in her round, good-

humoured voice. "We'll allow you your different ways of thinking. Your papa likes a warm fireside, don't you, Bates? But I suppose the gentleman comes straight from the beauty and fashion, as it says in the newspapers."

"Talking of the newspapers, Sir," said Mr. Bates, putting down his, "what do you think of the present crisis? What's things coming to? There's Rooshia threatening in the East, and as for your Khedivys and that sort, I don't believe in them. We'll all be in a precious hobble if we don't look out, as far as I can see."

"There, there, Bates, none of your politics," cried his wife; "once begin that, and nobody can get in a word—and the gentleman is just off a journey."

Young Curtis sat uneasily while all this went on, like a dog in leash, watching his opportunity to start. The sudden insight which had come to him with the entrance of his friend upon this scene was strange,

and very painful. He was very much in love, poor young fellow, and when a man is in love, it is curious how easily he can accept the circumstances of his beloved and find them natural. Matilda and Sarah Jane had only amused him before, as, indeed, they amused the new-comer now; but the family changed its aspect entirely as the young man, who was almost a member of it, realized to himself how it must appear to his friend, and saw the whole scene, as it were, through Durant's eyes. Durant's eyes, however, staring vaguely upon this slowly comprehended new world, did not see half so clearly or so sharply as Arthur's saw through them. He gave double force and meaning to the other's observations, and beheld through him many things which the other did not see. Fortunately—and how fortunate that was Arthur did not venture to say to himself—Nancy, who was affronted, did not open her mouth. He adored her, and yet he was glad she

was affronted, notwithstanding the pain it gave him. He could not bear to vex or alienate her for a moment, and yet he was thankful not to be obliged to see her too with his friend's eyes. But he saw all the rest, and the *ensemble* of the room, the village flirt Sarah Jane, and the lout Charley, and Mr. Bates with his slippers, and felt how stuffy it was, and the smell of the rum. His endurance had come to a climax when Mr. Bates began to talk a little thickly of politics. Once more he sprang to his feet.

"I know Durant has something to say to me," he cried. "I think I must ask you to excuse me to-night, Mrs. Bates. Everything must give way to business."

"Lord bless you, my dear, not of an evening," said the genial woman. "Don't ye go. Supper's coming. You know all our ways, and I daresay your friend—Mr. Durant is it? and how do you do, Mr. Durant, now I know you?—I daresay he'll

put up with us for your sake. Go you and hurry the supper, Sarah Jane."

"We'll have to go, really," said poor Arthur; and he stooped to his sullen love and whispered, "Don't be angry. He comes from my father. Though I can't bear to leave you, darling, I must hear what my father says."

"Oh, indeed, your father!" said Nancy. "I see what it is; it is just what I have always told you. You're ashamed of me and my folks, as soon as you get hold of one of your fine friends."

"Durant is not a fine friend, he is like my brother—he will be your friend too," whispered the young man in an agony.

But Nancy only pouted the more.

"I don't want such friends. I have got my father and my brother to see to me. You needn't bring any of your fine gentlemen here."

Notwithstanding, however, the blandishments of Sarah Jane and Matilda, the stranger had risen too. He was much

taller, and had a much finer figure than Arthur, the sisters thought, and he smiled, though his look was rather vague, staring as if he did not see them.

"You are very kind," he said, holding out his hand to Mrs. Bates, who hastened up to her feet too, to shake it with great cordiality. "I hope you will kindly repeat your invitation for another day, and that Arthur will bring me back, when I can take advantage of your hospitality; but I must not come among you under false pretences," he added, laughing, "for I know nothing about the rank and fashion —that is in Arthur's way rather than mine."

"Oh, Sir," said Mrs. Bates, bowing, "we know what gentlemen means when they speak in that high-minded way."

This speech was such a triumph of genial mystification and confidence that Durant stared still more, and hurried forth reduced to silence, feeling himself unable in his present puzzled con-

dition to cope with such an intellect. Poor Arthur, trying to seize the hand of his beloved, trying by piteous looks to move her from her sullen offence, lingered a moment, but in vain.

"Never mind her," said Mrs. Bates, "she will come to when you are gone. It'll all come right to-morrow. Good night, and God bless you! I'll see to Nancy; and you needn't keep the door open and me in a draught," she added querulously, "if you won't stay."

This quickened the steps of the lover, but though he was glad to get outside, and to leave the glare and odours of that room—so long his bower of bliss, so suddenly revealed to him in its real aspect—blown away, it is impossible to say how miserable he was at such a parting from the object of his love. It was she who opened the door for him on other occasions, lingered with him in the fresh evening air, and said "Good-night" a thousand times over, each time more

sweetly than the time before. So at least the foolish young fellow thought. But she had not lifted her head even to give him a last glance; she had not said "Good-night!" at all; she had dismissed him with a cloud upon her face. How was he to bear it till to-morrow? and yet how glad he was that when all of them had talked and betrayed themselves, she had never brought herself under those painful disenchanting reflections from his friend's eyes.

"Good-night, Arthur," said saucy Sarah Jane; "and good-night, Mr. Durant. "Be sure you bring him back to-morrow. You have promised mamma to come back morrow and have supper with us. Good-night, Mr. Durant."

Durant replied to the "Good-night" with a suppressed laugh, and walked away into the darkness with Arthur following. Though the freshness of the night was so great a relief after the heat indoors, it was not genial, but penetrating and dull, with

a shrewish touch, such as October often has; and the skies were dull with no moon, nothing but drifting clouds, and the street of the little town was not attractive. They walked on in silence together for some time, the stranger being occupied longer than was necessary in lighting his cigar; but he had no sooner managed this successfully than he threw it away again.

"Come to the inn, Arthur," he cried; "it's comfortless work talking here."

CHAPTER II.

THE inn at Underhayes was not much to speak of, but the parlour in which the two friends talked was larger than Mrs. Bates's parlour, where all the family assembled and all their existence was past. Durant sat down at the table to consume a simple dinner, a hastily-cooked chicken, which he had ordered after his journey, and which was not so savoury as the supper which Mrs. Bates would have given him; nor was it so cheerful a meal. While he ate, Arthur Curtis paced back and forward at the other end of the room, which, with its bare carpet and scant furniture, was still less objectionable than the room they had

left, the place where all his happiness had lain so long. Perhaps if the shock had come sooner some deliverance would have been possible, though at the cost of a heart-break; but nothing was possible now except to carry out his engagement. Lewis Durant was both honourable and high-minded, yet he had come with no better intention than to prevent his friend from keeping his word, with very little regard for the word and none at all for the happiness of the other person who was chiefly concerned. Happiness of a girl who had entangled a young man so much above herself! what was that to anybody? If she should be robbed of her happiness, why, was it not all her own fault? But he had not been so injudicious yet as to broach this idea; he was approaching it gradually, "acquiring information" on the subject. Of course it was natural that any one so interested in Arthur's affairs as he was, should like to know all about it, and he had seen Lady Curtis herself he did not con-

ceal from his friend, and the anxious mother was "in a great way."

"I'd like to take up satisfactory news, old fellow," he said; "both for their sake and my own."

"What do you call satisfactory news?" said Arthur. His mind was in an unexampled commotion. His old life and his new had come into active conflict, and he himself seemed to be the puppet between them. But in the midst of the excitement caused by this bringing back of all the habits of his former existence, the poor young fellow was miserable at the thought of having come away from his love without a kind word, without a look even, which could stand in the place of their usual Good-night.

"Well—it is difficult to speak in plain words between you and them. Of course you know that this can't be expected to give them satisfaction, Arthur. They have not been led on step by step as you have—"

"What do you mean?" he said hastiy. "Do you mean the vulgar sort of thing that every fool says, that *she* has been leading me on?"

"I certainly did not say so," said Durant. "I mean they have not been used to all the circumstances like you. Your mind has become familiar by degrees with this family—with everything about them."

"Say it out plainly; don't mind my feelings," said the other bitterly, "with the difference between Bates, the tax-collector's daughter and Sir John Curtis's son. Well! and what is the difference? All on her side; all in her favour. She getting nothing but additional beauty from all her surroundings, I—doing not much honour to mine."

"I was not making any personal comparison, Arthur," said Durant, cautiously; "I was saying only—what you will fully allow—that taken just by themselves, without that knowledge of personal excellence which I suppose you have;—that the

difference of the circumstances—the difference of manners—well! cannot but startle —shock perhaps—your immediate friends."

"That means that you are shocked and startled. Mr. Bates's rum and water was too much for your delicate nerves," said Arthur, with a sneer; "and yet you and I have seen worse things that we were not shocked at."

"Arthur, do you want to quarrel with me? or can you suppose I should have come here, if I had felt the slightest desire or intention to quarrel with you?"

The young man did not answer for some minutes, then he threw himself into a chair by the table and concealed his face from the other's gaze, supporting his head on his hands. "Don't you think I know everything you can say?" he cried; "it is plain enough. They are not like us —there are things in them which even I don't relish. Their ways are more homely, their manners more simple than we have been used to."

"If it was only simplicity," said Durant, shrugging his shoulders, and thinking of the blandishments of the Misses Matilda and Sarah Jane.

"Well," said Arthur, with a sudden outbreak, "call it what you like, what disagreeable name you please, and then I ask you what have you got to say to *her?* It is she I am going to marry, not her family. What have you got to say to HER? She is the person to be thought of. Old Bates is an old tax-collector, and the mother a good-natured old woman, and the sisters flirts if you please; I don't say anything to the contrary; but what have you to say against the girl herself? What of HER?"

"Arthur! I have nothing to say; how could I? She sat behind backs, with you to screen her. I saw that she was pretty—"

"You saw that she was like a lily growing among weeds; that she was like a princess among the common people;

that she behaved like the best-bred of ladies. That is what you would say, if you allowed yourself to speak the truth."

"If I speak at all I shall certainly speak the truth," said Durant, with a sigh of impatience. To him as to everyone else, Nancy Bates had seemed only an ordinary pretty girl; nothing more.

"Then speak!" said Arthur, "for if there is one assumption more intolerable than another, it is that of saying nothing with the aim of sparing your friend, as one who has nothing but what is disagreeable to say."

"You press me too hard," said Durant, smiling. "What can I say after what you have said? Arthur, this girl may be a Una for anything I can tell—as you wish me to believe she is; but how can I know? I can see she is pretty; but I don't know her; how can I divine what her character is? She may be everything you think; but all that *I* can possibly make out is

that she is apretty girl, with sense enough to hold her tongue."

Arthur grew red and grew pale as his friend spoke; his lip curled over his teeth with a furious sneer, almost like the snarl of a dog.

"Don't you think," he said, with an enraged semblance of extreme civility, "that when you are speaking of a lady who is about to become my wife, you might speak of her by another name than that of 'the girl.'"

"By Jove you are too good!" said Durant, half angry, half amused, "what should I say? You called her a girl yourself, and so she is; so are the Princesses for that matter."

"I call her many things which it would not become strangers to call her," said Arthur, "and I think, perhaps, on the whole, it would be better taste not to favour me with your opinion on this subject. You would not, I suppose, give me your frank estimate of my mother, for

instance, whatever it might be—and it is equally unnecessary of my wife."

"As you please," said Durant, offended; and then there ensued a temporary pause, during which the stranger, driven back upon that occupation, munched a crust with indignant fervour, and Arthur sat moodily by, holding his head in his hands. It was Durant who was the first to recover himself. The man who stands in the suspicious position of adviser and reprover, naturally does regain his temper sooner than the person who is advised and reproved. He said in a conciliating tone, "Why should we quarrel? I can have no right to disapprove of your choice. I am not here as the agent of your family, Arthur, who might have a right to interfere, but only as your friend. I can wish nothing but what is for your good."

"For my good!" the young man said through his teeth; then he, too, smoothed himself down. "I don't want to quarrel, Durant; but if my mother thinks I am to

be dictated to—or any friend of mine supposes he can come to look surprise and criticism, even if he does not say anything——"

"This is too much," said Durant, laughing; "if you are going to put meaning in my eyes which nature has denied to them, what can I say to you? I who scarcely see anything, to look criticism is rather too strong for a blind old mole like me!"

"Short-sighted people see a great deal more than they own," said Arthur, oracularly, "but I don't want to quarrel." And then again there was a pause.

"Answer me one thing," said Durant, re-opening the question after an interval; "have you really made up your mind to marry this—lady? Is it all settled? Is there room, or is there no room for anything I might find to say?"

"What could you find o say?"

"That is not the question," said Durant; "whatever it might be it is un-

necessary to say it if everything is settled. But, Arthur, if there is still time—if I may still once, before it is too late, speak plainly to you?"

"It is too late," said Arthur hotly. "I am to be married in a fortnight; I should be married to-morrow if I could. Supposing you had the finest arguments in the world, and the best reasons against it, do you think I would break her heart and my own for your reasonings. Yes, it *is* all settled, and nothing on earth can change it."

He got up as he spoke, and marched about the room with an air of defiance. Then he came back to where his friend was sitting, and sat down on a corner of the table, swinging his legs.

"All the same," he said, with a laugh of affectation and bravado, "I'd like to hear what you have to say against it. It might be novel and amusing, perhaps."

"I have not the slightest desire to be amusing."

"Oh, impressive then—that is as good or better; impressive, eloquent! let us hear, Durant. I should like a specimen of the grand style you keep for your most serious cases."

"Yours is not one of them," said Durant calmly; "yours is simple enough. Don't let us go farther, Arthur; we should come to blows again, and that would not answer my purpose, nor yours either."

"Then you refuse to tell me what of course you came here to say. Your plea cannot be very powerful this time, nor your brief worth much," said Arthur, with a pretence at scorn which was full of aggravation. This stirred his friend more than anything yet had done.

"My brief," he said, "was not prepared as most briefs are. It seems to me that you are not worthy even to hear of it. 'Prove the culprit guilty' is what most briefs enjoin, but this one was 'Prove him innocent; let his very judges see him to be right, and not wrong.' These were my instructions; they do not much re-

semble your notion of them; nor do they deserve to be received in this way."

Arthur rose again from his seat, and walked about the room restless and uncertain.

"Say what you have to say," he said; "I will not interrupt you. Let me hear it all."

"I have already told you that, if everything is settled and your mind made up, it would be foolish to go on at all. If there is any hope I will speak. Arthur," said Durant suddenly, "you are very fastidious—very difficult to please in ordinary cases. Do you think you will be able to live with the good people we have seen to-night?"

"Why should I live with them? they have nothing to do with it. A wife comes with her husband. *They*, whatever they may be, are quite outside the question. She is to be thought of, and she alone."

"Have you ever reflected, Arthur, that if *she*—the lady—is as noble a character

as you think, she will not give up her own people for you or anyone? I should not care to have a woman do that for me. I think she would have good reason to judge me severely after, if I failed in threefold duty to her. You should be father and mother in such a case—and husband too."

"And so I mean to be, so I am! What are father and mother to me now? I have formed a tie which is beyond all these mechanical, understood ties, in which there is no choice on the child's part; and she will feel as I do."

"Women don't always do that," said Durant; "and I, for one, don't like them when they do. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that she did not, what should you do then? It is worth taking into consideration."

"She would be sure to do what was best; and if that is all, we can easily baffle your cross-examination, Durant. You are not good at bullying witnesses," said

Arthur, his heart rising in spite of him. "Ask me something more difficult than this."

"You would have to live," said the other. "I don't think that is more difficult, but you may not be of my opinion. How are you to live? upon your allowance, which has never been too much for you alone?"

"Two spend no more than one," said the catechumen, recovering his spirits; "and she is not a spendthrift like me. She has been trained to make a little go a great way. She will reduce my expenses instead of increasing them."

"Yet two eat more than one, to put it on the simplest ground."

"Eat! that is like you, Durant. How little you know about it! Is it on eating one spends one's money? So far as that goes, you may say what you please. There is nothing in *you*, old fellow, to frighten anyone. Come, I forgive your objections

to my happiness when I see how little you have got to say."

"You are sure then, entirely sure, that it is your happiness, Arthur?" Durant rose, and put his hands on his friend's shoulders, looking down upon him with a face full of emotion. "You have been the nearest a brother of anything I ever knew —brother, or sister, or both together. Are you sure, boy, are you sure? Happiness is a sacred thing. I would not touch it, I would not harm it. Are you sure?"

"As sure as that I love her, Durant."

The elder man dropped his hands from the other's shoulder, and turned away with a sigh. Whether it was the half-inspired look which at that moment came into Arthur's face, or the resemblance of that face to another, or the superiority over himself of this boy whom he had been lecturing, and whom he had lectured so often — whatever it was, he turned away, with something that made his sight

more uncertain than ever, rising in his eyes.

"Then I can't say anything to you," he said, in a voice tremulous with feeling. "I can say nothing to you! I would not meddle with that, right or wrong, were it to cost me mine."

"Yours, old fellow?" cried Arthur, in the effusiveness of victory. "Hurrah for love! It's the thing worth living for. Are you in Arcadia too?"

Durant did not make any answer. He went to the window, and looked out upon the dark night and the lamps flaring; and then returned to his chair. Whatever commotion there had been in his countenance, he had got rid of it. Neither blush nor smile was on his serious face, nor any further manifestation of sympathy. Arthur looked at him, and burst into excited laughter.

"You don't look much like a fortunate shepherd," he said. "Love! that was a bad guess; it was law I should have said

—briefs and fees, and a silk gown at the end; that's what moves you."

"Ay, ay," said the other, vaguely; "that's what it is. Mine is not a corresponding case. You were always luckier, brighter than I, and I don't grudge it you, Arthur. Your happiness (if you are happy) will be almost as good for me as my own. But I don't think either of them very probable just now," he went on, suddenly changing his tone; "that is the fact. I am not in a good way, and, my boy, you are in a bad way. I'll say it once for all. You are deceiving yourself. You are the last man in the world to do this sort of thing. You will repent it, sooner or later. Don't look at me as if you thought me a fool, with that supercilious face. It is you who are the fool. You are going to do what you will wish undone all the days of your life."

"Durant!" cried Arthur, furious, springing from his seat, and lifting his arm as if for a blow.

His friend stood up facing him, folding his arms. His face had flushed with a momentary gleam of passion while he spoke. Now it stilled and paled again, and he stood in his superior strength, looking calmly at the slighter being whom he had roused to momentary fury. The young man's clenched fist fell by his side. He turned away angry, but subdued.

"No man in the world but you dare speak so," he said, "and even from you I will never bear it again."

"You shall not be required," said Durant, sadly. "I have said, once for all, what was in my mind. Now—I know you well enough—you'll go and do what you want to do, Arthur, and with all the more zest. And when you have paid for your happiness, and got to the bottom of it, you will come to me again."

"I think you presume a little too much on our long friendship," said Arthur, seizing his hat. "Good night; there has been enough of this. Things will be bad

indeed with me, I promise you, if, after this speech of yours, I ever come to you again."

He rushed out of the room before the other could reply. Durant went to the window and looked after him with a wistful subdued light of pity and tenderness in his face.

"I wonder how long it will be first?" he said to himself.

CHAPTER III.

LEWIS DURANT was the *ami de l'enfance* of Arthur Curtis. He had always been a little bigger, a little stronger, a little steadier, as he was a little older than his friend. He was not a young man of family like Arthur; and Lady Curtis, who was philosophical in her tendencies, had pointed many a social criticism by the fact, laughingly commented upon, that her son's fagmaster at Eton, and Mentor in life, was the grandson of the great saddler with whom Sir John and his predecessors had dealt for ages. The Durants, who were French by origin, had made a great deal of money in that business, and one of

the sons had been made a clergyman. This was the father of Lewis, who had been brought up accordingly in as much luxury as his friend; but unfortunate speculations on his father's part had changed all that by this time, and the young man was now fighting his way at the Bar, with very little to keep up the warfare on, and none of those supports of good connection which help the aristocratic poor to keep their heads above water. He had a home in the depths of one of the Midland counties, where the Rector—once able to hold his own with the best of his country neighbours, and considered a very good sort of man—had fallen to the ordinary parsonic level, without any standing ground beyond it, and not much right to high consideration on that ground. For the Rev. Mr. Durant was not a very good clergyman. It had not been the object of his life to become so; but rather to obliterate from all minds by his luxurious living, his carriages, his conservatories,

his expenditure in every way, that he was the son of the well-known saddler; as it has been that saddler's object to advance his son in life and make him a member of the upper class by making him a clergyman. Everybody was quite conscious of this while he was rich; but, naturally, everybody became still more conscious of it when he became poor; and as his wealth had been his chief standing ground, and he had not much worth or goodness, and no activity, to gain him credit in his parish, the downfall was pretty nearly complete. And the woman whom he had married had been no more than a fit partner for such a man; so that when Lewis, their only child, became old enough to think of home as anything more than a jolly place to spend holidays in, the boy's refined and delicate mind had suffered a severe shock. How it was that he happened to possess a refined and delicate mind is a totally different question, and one into which we need not inquire; but the effect upon him

of the ostentatious, showy, lavish, and lazy wealth in the first instance, and of the useless, slovenly, languid poverty which followed, was remarkable enough. A great many things go by contraries in this perverse world, and nothing more commonly than the habits of parents and children. In Scotland, it has passed into a proverb that an active mother has an indolent daughter. The insinuating and bland courtier has to struggle against the abruptness or loutishness of his son, and even virtue has very often moral weakness, if not worse, for its next descendant. In Lewis Durant's case the contradiction was a happy one. Disgusted by the aimless leisure and nothingness of the paternal life, the young man flung himself into work with a zeal and passion seldom to be found. He had no family friends in the class he had been brought up in, and his personal friends were of his own standing, themselves too young and inexperienced to help others; but he had not cared for

this; he had flung himself into the work of his profession—the Bar—for which he had been trained as his father had been trained for the Church, as the profession of a gentleman, a trade not incompatible with the possession of a great deal of money, and not requiring to be kept up by the happy man who was not obliged to work for his bread. Perhaps the energy of the old saddler had got into the veins of Lewis, transmuted into some kind of potable gold, some elixir of force and life. If so, it had clearly "suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange," for there was no greed of gold, no thirst for wealth in the young man's mind. On the contrary, if he had not known forcibly the many good things that money can do, and which the absence of money prevents from getting done, Lewis would have hated money, so associated was it with everything that had most galled and humbled him. But money is not a thing to be scorned, and he had too much sense

and too much honesty to feign. He worked with a concentration of force and steady effort which was intensified every time he visited the aimlessness of his home. He had come from that home now, and had left it, as he always did, impatient of rest, eager to plunge again into the active warfare of life, to strain muscle and sinew, and all the powers of mind and frame.

This was the man, who since they were boys, had been Arthur Curtis's chief friend. He himself was the only son of Sir John, a true rural potentate, a man whose life was full of stolid dignity and duty, made steady, and in a dull matter of fact manner, noble, by the proud sense of obligation to his country, his son, and his dependents, such as long descent and elevated position sometimes give. Sir John Curtis might sometimes be ridiculous, but he was always respectable, making an aim at his duty in a large, conscientious, stupid way, in which there was a certain obtuse grand-

eur. He carried this into the smallest detail of his life, and the result was, that he was held by most people to be pompous, and admired by some as the chief source of serious comedy in his neighbourhood. But his life was a blurred version, surrounded by all kinds of imperfections of a noble ideal—a thing not always perceived by his wife and his son, to whom however Sir John's deficiencies, on the other hand, were very plain. And Arthur, for the time at least, was almost as contradictory of his father as Lewis was. He was light-minded and heedless, idle, foolish yet clever, generous yet selfish; the kind of young man who is always in scrapes, often in the wrong, yet rarely, or never, unbeloved. He had been idle at the University, and had not taken his degree—then had gone home for a time and had done nothing. And now this last and most serious scrape of all had been brought on, as it were, by the most virtuous resolution of his life.

It was his mother's earnest desire that he should enter public life, in one way or other; and Arthur himself had been dazzled by the chances of diplomacy, an opening into which seemed before him, and had come now, in a sudden fit of industry and virtue, to see if, by the help of a noted "coach," he could "pull through" his examinations, and get the University stamp, though late, impressed upon him. There had been no particular reason why he had not achieved that University stamp before. He was a tolerable scholar, and had meant honours—but had not been industrious enough to attain them, and had thrown up the milder standard in disgust. Thus he had come to Underhayes, intending better than, perhaps, he had ever steadfastly intended in his life; and lo! Nancy Bates was the result.

All this was in Durant's mind, as, after a troubled night, he looked out of his inn window in the morning upon a mellow

sunshiny morning of true October weather, a warm yellow haze in the air, which melted into the ripe foliage below, and the mottled clouds above. The little town was embosomed in trees. It was a little more than a village, a little less than a town; and, perhaps, had become more of a suburb than either, being within the radius of London, and coming nearer to that increasing centre every day. The metropolis and the village had been long putting forth arms of approach towards each other, and Underhayes had grown gradually larger, and nearer year by year. There was still a village green in the centre of the place; but the old houses had put on new fronts, and got enlargements of various kinds, and had become the homes of London people who went to town every morning, instead of the poorish, but very genteel persons who used to inhabit them This was a great gain to the place, and made it swell and grow bigger and bigger; but at the same time it was a loss and for-

feiture of all the originality, and much of the quiet beauty, and no little of the genial and graceful comfort that had once dwelt around the green. Everybody was richer, larger, vainer; and gorgeous entertainments were given, at which there was much more expenditure but less friendliness than of old. The city men considered themselves a great deal more intelligent, as they certainly were more knowing, than the older inhabitants, the retired captains and colonels, the widows and old maids, and solitary couples, who were now dying out in the too active air of the place. But these relics of olden days, at least, returned their scorn with interest, if they could not compete with them in other ways. Half way between these two sections of the community stood Mr. Eagles, the great "coach," whose fame was in all the schools and all the services. He lived in an old-fashioned house with an old gate, the posts of which were surmounted by two great stone balls, and

which opened upon a bit of real avenue, and enclosed real grounds, something more than a garden. It was a genuine old house, in which a retired Cabinet Minister had once lived. It was true he had built additions to it, but they were done in good taste, and strict submission to the original style of the house, which was taken as a kind of homage to the antique and Conservative class, by that class itself. He had a large house, and he took pupils; but yet it was nothing like a school, for the young men did not live with him—no one but young Mr. Curtis, who was not to call a pupil, who was "reading" for his degree, and who was a young man of excellent family and an acquisition to any society. Arthur indeed, in his own person, was one of the chief conciliatory circumstances which made the old inhabitants on the Green tolerate and receive Mr. Eagles, whom the new inhabitants looked upon with respect as a man who had made his way.

The little inn in which Durant had passed the night was opposite the gateway with the stone balls. Underhayes was not enough of a place to have a good inn. People who frequented inns had no object in going there. It was not far enough from London, nor near enough; and there were no exceptional attractions as in Kew or Richmond. Therefore, amid all the changes and improvements, the Red Lion was just what it had always been, a homely place with a sign-board standing out upon the edge of the Green, and a bench, shaded by trees, where its homely customers could sit and drink their beer. And on the other side of the Green stood Mr. Eagle's gate, breaking the high wall in which his house and its grounds were enclosed, and from whence there burst, in autumn richness of colour, over the wall, a rich border of trees.

Durant got up in much doubt and discomfort of mind after a restless night. He went out into the soft breezy air,

which was warm, yet not quite free of the crispness of a first threatening of frost. Spruce men were passing on all sides, well brushed and neat, with daintily rolled umbrellas, with light great-coats, sometimes with a book, or a bundle of letters to read in the train, going to business—all walking with air alert that spoke of a definite aim, and the pre-occupation of something to do—which did not interfere, however, with a genial readiness to hear, or report the last piece of gossip. Many of them had choice flowers in their coats, a touch of the poetry which means luxury rather than taste, with which to sweeten the office and show the skill of their respective gardeners. All this was new to Durant, who knew nothing about the ways of the city, though he acknowledged with respect the air of work and serious occupation, which called forth his sympathy, though it did not take the form with which he was acquainted. He watched them passing, going to the train;

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and then was conscious of the lull and desertion of the Green :—the momentary pause, half of regret, half of relief, at the departure of all this activity, and then the rising of the second more tranquil wave of movement, the tradespeople's carts and messengers, the butcher and baker setting out on their rounds. How many little worlds like this, each complete in its own conceit, were rushing on and on, unconscious each of its neighbour! But he certainly had no time for those *banales* reflections, occupied as he was with painful considerations as to whether he could still do anything, or say anything to justify his mission here. What could he do or say? Arthur had left him in high dudgeon—offended apparently beyond redemption. He was not so much disturbed by this as he might have been; for he knew Arthur, and that it was not in his nature to quarrel permanently, however angry he might be for the moment. But the question was, whether he could do anything independent of Arthur, upon

whom he did not feel that his influence for the present would be very weighty? He thought, with a smile, of the recorded proceedings in a similar case, the steps taken by the protectors of another Arthur—for where but in fiction can such difficulties find their readiest parallel? But Durant had no standing ground on which to emulate the masterly tactics of Major Pendennis, though the example occurred to him seriously. No—the position of Arthur Curtis had not been exaggerated, nor was there any glamour of false light about the subject which he could dispel. He was very much puzzled, very doubtful and anxious. He could not leave the place without attempting something more—but what was he to do?

His thoughts were thus occupied when he saw the gates opposite to him open hastily and some one come out—a small resolute man, with peremptory short steps and a dogmatical bearing. Durant felt at once that this was Mr. Eagles, and

that he was coming towards him; and there was an air of vexation still more decided than his own on the brow of the famous tamer and trainer of "men." He came across the Green at a rapid pace.

"Mr. Durant, I presume? My name is Eagles," he said. "I hope you have brought some light with you on a most difficult subject. What is to be done with this boy?"

"You mean Curtis?"

"Yes, I mean Curtis. Nothing in the least like it has ever happened among my pupils before. I feel my establishment disgraced by it—*disgraced*, Mr. Durant. So utterly abominable an example! I don't as a rule take charge of men's morals or conduct, and I heartily repent having received this one into my house. It was a silly thing for me to do; but a fellow who had been at a public school and at the university, who would have supposed he could have turned out such a fool?"

"Pardon me," said Durant, reddening, "he may have been foolish, but he is not a fool."

"Oh, if you stand up for him! I thought you had come here, as is the part of a friend, to endeavour to convince him of his folly."

"It is not so easy. Is it not the very essence of folly to think itself wiser than all its advisers?" said Durant with a sigh. "May I ask you how you knew I was here."

"Oh, he told me; there is a certain frankness about him. And I saw you perambulating the Green, which is a thing unusual at this hour, and guessed it must be you. I wish him to go."

"To go! Curtis?"

"Yes, Curtis. I wish him to go. He is (of course) doing no good here, and the story has oozed out, equally of course. How can I tell that some other idiot may not be moved by his example, and put himself at the feet of a sister? I shall get

a bad name. I!—because your friend is a sentimental idiot."

"Patience!" said Durant, laughing in spite of himself. "I don't see how any one can blame you."

"Nor I; but they will," said Mr. Eagles. "Of all foolish and unreasonable persons on the face of the earth, parents are the most unreasonable. You must take your man away."

"But he is not my man. I have no authority over him."

"You are his friend, and you seem to have some sense, and you know his father. This is my ultimatum—you must take your man away. I have no time to say any more. Good morning, Mr. Durant. I like promptitude, and I expect you to act at once upon what I say."

CHAPTER IV.

DURANT felt that after this shock he needed a little quiet, to re-establish him in his former thoughts. Mr. Eagles had assailed him like a charge of cavalry. He laughed, yet he was shaken. It was not in his power to take away his man; indeed he was in the most uncomfortable position possible, supposed to hold an official position in respect to Arthur, and, indeed, endowed with powers of remonstrance and reproof, but with no authority —the most difficult of all circumstances. He could neither take away his man, nor even oblige that man to hear reason, and yet he was more or less responsible for

him; and to crown all, his man had quarrelled with him, and shaken off even the ties of affection which had hitherto bound them. This, it is true, did not affect him so much as it might have done had he been less familiar with Arthur, who he knew could never stand out or maintain the separation. To be sure, Arthur, backed up by a new family, and with the possible evil animus of "a set of women" added to his personal offence, was a person as yet unknown to his friend; and though Durant was kind, and did not think evil of others, yet he was not able to divest himself of the natural prepossession against the "set of women" whose ideas henceforward must, more or less, inspire Arthur. It is a compliment at least to the mental power of women that this is the first thought that springs into anyone's head when a man makes, or is understood to be about to make, an unsuitable marriage. The man may be wiser, cleverer, infinitely of more importance than the woman as a

moral being; but the whole inspiration of his conduct is instantly believed to be *hers*. Durant had not a notion what was the mental calibre of Nancy Bates. On the surface, of course, it could only be taken for granted that a member of the educated classes, a University man, would count for more than an untaught girl, the daughter of ignorant people. But nobody thinks so, and Durant was like everyone else. He began to wonder what sort of people the Bates' were, and finally determined to go and see them according to the invitation of last night. He might as well feign a little even, with this admirable motive, and show himself friendly by way of being as unfriendly as possible. He was not quite sure of the moral grandeur of the proceeding. Take it all in all, indeed, the effort to seduce Arthur from his allegiance before their very eyes, so to speak; to beguile him into breaking his word and renouncing his plighted faith, was not, on the surface, a highly moral

proceeding. But yet Durant, when he came, had been unable to conceive anything more desirable than this. If he could only have succeeded in persuading Arthur to do it, it would not only have left no weight on his conscience, but he would have felt that he had done well. The girl herself! What of the girl herself? She was a gambler, playing for high stakes. As for feeling on her part, who was at all likely to take that into consideration? Certainly when Lewis Durant did not (and it never occurred to him), it was extremely unlikely that any one else would.

This thought, however, having got into his mind, he resolved on carrying it out. He would go and see these people, and find out whether anything could be done with them, and again (with a smile) he thought of Major Pendennis and his most successful negotiations. These were the tactics the Major adopted, and they had proved excellently adapted for the pur-

pose. The circumstances, however, were evidently different. Nothing could be said of Arthur Curtis, unless his friend was prepared to lie in his behalf, which would shake the confidence of the girl's family in the advantages of the marriage. He was Sir John's only son, the estates were entailed, there was but one sister to share even the personal property of the family, and Lady Curtis was very well off in her own right. Anything that could be said, would only make the Bates family more certain that Nancy had done an admirable thing for herself, so admirable that nothing should be allowed to stand in her way. Howsoever the lover's friends might object, nothing could be done to do away altogether with the advantages of the marriage, and Durant felt that the family would be fools indeed to allow any meddler like himself to affect their action in the matter. Still people are fools now and then, notwithstanding the strong hold of self-interest, and might be beguiled into a false step, notwith-

standing that every inducement was on the other side. All this passed through Durant's mind, and he did not blush at the thought. It seemed to him quite justifiable, nay, laudable. It was to save Arthur; if he could save Arthur by deceiving others, what then? And as for the girl! Talk of hearts, if you please, in other conditions of life, but the heart of a village girl who beguiles a gentleman into falling in love with her! Honest, honourable, and true as he was, Durant, strangely enough, had still no compunction there. Could he have broken Arthur's troth-plight like a wand, he would have been delighted with himself.

He did not know his way very well, having threaded a number of small dark streets, in the rain, the night before, led by the vague directions of various officious guides; but he had a notion in which direction it was, and he had abundance of time before him. He had not gone very far, indeed, before he met an individual

who might easily have guided him, and whom he passed with a curious consciousness that here would be the most vulnerable member of the family—no less a person than Mr. Bates himself; a little stout man in a large white neckcloth, with a book in his hand, and an appearance of ink spots about him, which betrayed the existence of what is euphemistically called writing materials somewhere about his person. The expression of his face was not less characteristic of his profession. No softening atmosphere of rum was about him now. His face was red, probably from those long continued, though moderate evening indulgences, and his lips were pursed up and tight. He looked the kind of man whose proceedings would be summary, who would take no excuses, who would be rigid as fate in the punctuality of his applications. Durant watched him furtively from the other side of the street; and the conclusion to which he came was that Mr. Bates, though obdurate with his district, would be incapable of standing an

assault from anyone of superior condition; and however arbitrary he might be to a defaulter in rates, would not venture to withstand a Sir John, should he demand the sacrifice of his Iphigenia. Should he approach him at once, thus unprotected, in the middle of his duties, and frighten him into a promise to shut his doors upon Arthur? For a moment Durant hesitated; for, in the first place, he was not Sir John, and in the second place, he distrusted the power of the tax-gatherer to contend with "those women." To subdue the women themselves was a more desperate piece of work, but it would be more effectual were it done. With this conclusion, he went on making his way in the direction which he supposed the right one. He would not awaken curiosity by inquiring, and he had abundant time, as it was still early. The forenoon was bright and genial, but the place was very quiet. The men had been swept out of it by the morning train. Except Mr. Bates, and the butchers and

bakers, and a stray parson of the High Church sect, who blocked out a large piece of sunshine with his cassock and cloak, there was no one visible, for it was too early for the female population to leave the business of their houses. He was sure to find all the females of the Bates' family, he thought, in the stuffy little parlour, with probably some preparations for dinner going on side by side with the bonnet making. And the heroine, what might she be doing?—not seated on the sofa, nor love-making, he hoped; the bonnet was better than that. He made several little pictures of her in his imagination, now standing upon her dignity as engaged to a gentleman, putting on a multitude of little airs, lording it over her sisters. No doubt this was how she would show her success. He knew nothing whatever about Nancy, but as his object was to destroy her hopes, he represented her to himself, unconsciously, as affected by the very

poorest version possible of these hopes. It was natural. While, however, he was pursuing these thoughts and his way together, he suddenly encountered, coming round a corner, one of the sisters, whom he had met on the previous night. They came so suddenly upon each other, that both paused, with the slight shock of almost personal contact.

"Oh, Mr. Durant!" cried Sarah Jane.

She blushed "to be caught" in her cotton frock and shabby hat, running out in the morning—not such was the apparel in which she would have chosen to be seen by a gentleman—but Sarah Jane was a born flirt, and even her frock did not subdue her. She would not lose the opportunity. And to tell the truth, the cotton frock was much more becoming, had she known it, than the cheap travesties of "the fashion" which she generally wore.

"I am very glad to have met you, Miss Bates," he said. "I was trying to find the way to your house."

"Oh, la!" said Sarah Jane, her eyes dancing. This was something to the purpose, for why should he come to the house so soon but for *some reason?* And it could not be Matilda. "But I ain't Miss Bates, I'm the youngest," she said. "If you'll just come two or three steps down this street first, I'll show you the way. I've got some ribbon to match—look here, Matty's new Sunday bonnet—but I shan't be a moment, and I'll show you the way."

Durant consented; it seemed to him the best chance he could have had of acquiring information. He turned and walked down the street by the side of the girl, who was half-wild with pride and pleasure. She could see one or two faces glance out through shop-windows with surprise and envy. To be seen walking along the street with such a gentleman-like-looking man! There was nobody in Underhayes, except Arthur, who looked so distinguished, not even Colonel Hooker,

who was supposed by everybody to be the glass of fashion. This was a delusion of fancy on Sarah Jane's part, for Durant's appearance was nowise remarkable; but as life is but thought, the idea was quite as good to her as if it had been true.

"I go all the messages," said Sarah Jane. "I think it is very hard, especially as the girl is there, doing next to nothing; but they say they can't trust the girl. Girls *are* very queer; they are not to be depended upon. I am sure, the trouble mamma has with ours!"

They had not kept a girl very long, and Sarah Jane was still a little proud of it as of a sign of social distinction. She turned to her new friend for sympathy, though reflecting, as she did so, that probably he was living in lodgings, and had not in his own person either the pride or the difficulty of managing a servant of any kind.

"Yes," said Durant; "I agree with

you, Miss Bates. Girls, so far as I have seen them, are very queer."

"Ain't they?" cried Sarah Jane, relieved as to his circumstances, of which a momentary doubt had crossed her mind; "never to be relied on, and eating, ma says, as much as any two of us. So I go to the shops. I don't mind it, generally; and then if I didn't go, who would? Matilda has no eyes. She never sees when a thing doesn't match; and Nancy, you know, she's always either with Arthur, or doing something for him. I daresay he's there now."

"Is he there all day? That must be rather a bore for you."

"That's what I always say, Mr. Durant. I daresay Nancy may like it, for, of course, he is her young man; but we can't do a thing like we used, with him always there. I wish to goodness gracious they were married. Our parlour is a very nice room, but it's too small to have these two continually there. Mamma always

will call it a parlour, though drawing-room is so much better."

"I prefer parlour."

"Do you now? how funny! All our friends say drawing-room, though I think, after all, they oughtn't to, as we take our meals there. It is such a trouble running in and out from one room to another, and keeping up two fires. At least, I should not think it a trouble, but mamma does. She likes her old-fashioned ways. Will Arthur be very rich, Mr. Durant, and will he be a baronet when his father dies?"

"He will certainly be a baronet when his father dies."

"What luck for Nancy!" cried Sarah Jane; "and she met him just by chance, you know, as I might meet—anyone in the street." She had intended to say "you," but paused in time. "When old Aunt Anna died, it was her she left everything to, all her funny old dresses, and her money. Perhaps you did not know

that she was the rich one? People say it is a shame, and that Matilda should have got it, as she is the eldest; but Matilda isn't so kind as Nancy. I should not have got any good of it if Matilda had been the heiress. But fancy! when Nancy gets a dress for herself, she always gets one for me too, so I am just as well off as though the money were mine."

"That is very kind of Miss Bates," said Durant, not seeing how to find his way through all this prattle, and a little impatient of the long detour.

"She is not Miss Bates; she's the second, next to me; and I think—if you will not tell anyone—that when she marries Arthur, who is rich, she will give up her legacy. I don't know if it will be to me; I wish it might be to me—not that I should keep it all to myself; but it is so nice to have it all in one's hands, and make the rest feel under obligations to you. Don't you think it is very nice? Especially Matilda. I should like to say to

her, 'Matilda, dear, shouldn't you like a new bonnet?' Oh, what fun it would be! and her looks between wanting the bonnet and not wanting to have it from me."

"It would be amusing, no doubt," said Durant; "but do you think it is quite sure that Mr. Curtis will be so rich? I should think it would be better for your sister to keep her money, for she will have a great many expenses."

"Oh, you nasty, unkind, mean—that's not what I was going to say," cried Sarah Jane; "but, dear me, you told me yourself Arthur was rich! Ain't he a baronet's son? What does he want with her little bit of money? I should be ashamed, myself, of taking money with my wife when I didn't want it, if I was a rich gentleman. I call that mean."

"But perhaps Mr. Curtis is not so rich as you think," said Durant. "His father is not an old man; there is no reason why

Sir John should not live for twenty years or more."

"Twenty years or more!" cried Sarah Jane, turning upon him eyes that were full of dismay. She stopped short in the street to turn round and fix upon him her alarmed gaze. "Do you mean to say that Nancy—do you mean to tell me that Arthur?— But that would be no better than marrying anyone else. Just Missis, like everybody! Why Nancy!—Nancy will never give in to that."

"I thought that probably you were deceiving yourselves," said Durant, with some complacency, wondering at this depth of ignorance indeed, but extremely pleased with himself for having divined it, and thus finding a means of working. "Miss Nancy, if she marries Mr. Curtis, will be plain Missis, as you say, for all the world as if she had married the grocer at the corner."

"Oh, the grocer! that is what she is never likely to do," cried Miss Sarah Jane,

with a conscious look towards the corner. The grocer was standing at the door in his apron—a good-looking young man, whose eyes were fixed, as Durant saw with some amusement, on himself, and with a decidedly hostile look. Miss Sarah Jane gave him a nod of airy fascination across the street. Perhaps but for this conversation she would not have been so gracious. Durant perceived that he himself was being presented in the light of a possible rival to the young tradesman, of whom he had spoken so lightly, and it was all he could do to keep his gravity in this very novel and unexpected conjuncture. He made an effort, however, and went on.

"You must know," he said, "that an independent poor man like that very good-looking grocer—"

"Oh, poor! none so poor! he is better off than many folks that make a deal more show," said Sarah Jane.

"That is precisely what I was going to say. An independent man in his position,

may be really in much better circumstances than the son of a more important person. Sir John Curtis is not a man to be trifled with," Durant went on, with a momentary half-amused compunction for this cruel slander upon poor Sir John. "He is stern in his own views; he is capable of withdrawing his son's allowance altogether if he is dissatisfied with his marriage. I am very sorry to alarm you, but I feared you might be under some delusion, and this was what I wanted to say."

Sarah Jane's eyes had been growing wider and wider with alarm and wonder. She turned round upon her heel as upon a pivot.

"Now I think of it," she said, "Matilda had better come and match her ribbon herself. It is only for the strings, and the bonnet is not more than half done—and, please, come and tell all this to mother yourself. Nancy's a dear," said the girl, with a look which entirely changed

her aspect to her sympathetic companion. "She may have her faults, but she's always been kind, and I can't bear that she should be deceived. Come and tell it to them at home. Mother knows a deal—she's cleverer than any of us; *she'll* know if you're right or wrong; but I won't have Nancy put upon, not—" cried the girl, with a vehemence of regard which only the strongest asseveration could justify—"not if I was never to have another new dress for years and years!"

CHAPTER V.

THE unlikely pair retraced their steps rapidly, turning towards the house of the Bates'; but the effect of Durant's revelation soon died off from the mind of Sarah Jane. She had done what duty required in taking him at once to her mother. Once told to that supreme authority, Sarah Jane felt that her mind was clear of all responsibility, and, indeed, as a matter of fact, she dismissed the burden of this new revelation long before her companion ceased his efforts to impress it upon her. She tried what she could to beguile him into lighter talk; she broke in upon him with lively observations, and little essays

of friendly familiarity. The momentary agitation of sympathy which had almost interested Durant in her died away. She began to pout as he went on.

"Oh, please don't talk for ever about Arthur; I ain't in love with Arthur, though Nancy is. I think you might find another subject," she said. "They make a deal too much of him at home; I think, and so does Matilda, that there are nicer-looking and as gentlemanlike-looking in Underhayes as he is. What do you think of Underhayes, Mr. Durant? Is not it a pretty little place? If I had my choice I would live in London, and every night of my life I'd go to a dance or to the play. I don't pretend to be good, as some girls are. I shouldn't go about among the poor, or sing in church. What I'd like, would be to go to a party every night, or else to the play."

"I should think you would soon be tired of that," said Durant; "fashionable people get quite worn out. They get pale

and colourless, not fresh and blooming, like you."

"Oh," cried Sarah Jane, feeling that this was the kind of talk in which she shone, "tell me about fashionable people, Mr. Durant! Are they a great deal prettier than we are? I suppose they look so with all their grand dresses; but I should not care to catch people by dress, and make them think me good-looking when I wasn't; I would much rather look what I am, and then nobody would be deceived."

"You could have no inducement to look anything but what you are," said Durant amused, giving this young savage, since she asked for it so plainly, the gewgaw of compliment which she wanted. Sarah Jane brightened, and coloured, and bridled with pleasure. Let Nancy fare as she might, here was an immediate advantage her sister could have, without any evil effect on Nancy's future.

"Oh, you are just like all the gentle-

men," she said, "always paying compliments; if the girls were not a deal more sensible than you think, you would turn our heads. But if there is one thing I despise, it is the silly girls that believe everything that is said to them. A little experience teaches you better than that," said Sarah Jane.

"And what does experience teach Miss Bates," said Durant, suppressing his laugh.

"I told you before I was not Miss Bates; I am Miss Sarah Jane. Some people don't think it very pretty, but I will never be ashamed of my name. Is it true that they go to five or six parties in a night, one after the other? I should not like that; where I am enjoying myself I like to stay. If it was dull, perhaps it would be a good thing to try another, but fancy a ball being dull! it is, I suppose, for the old wallflowers that don't dance, but I think a ball heavenly. Don't you think so, Mr. Durant? I have been at three—

the volunteers' ball, and the—two others that you wouldn't know about; and I nearly danced my shoes to pieces at all the three."

"It was natural then that you should enjoy them," said Durant.

"Yes, wasn't it? I never would miss one if I could help it. Now Nancy was so foolish she never went at all, but started out for a long walk with Arthur, just as we were going. Wasn't it silly? I think she was sorry though next day, when she heard us talking of it and counting our partners, Matilda and me. A girl may be going to be married, without giving up all her pleasures. But Nancy is a deal too good; I believe she would not mind giving up a ball even, if Arthur was not there, to let me go."

"I am glad to hear she is so kind."

"Oh yes, she is very kind. But she wanted me to wear an old dress of aunt's, and that I would not put up with. She does not mind looking a guy herself. I

danced seven waltzes straight off, without ever sitting down, but I was not tired—not a bit tired. Oh, what fun it was! I wish there was one to-night—I wish there was one every night. I could dance till six o'clock in the morning, and never tire."

"I hope then for your sake," said Durant, "that there are a great many balls at Underhayes."

"No, indeed. It requires to be some public thing, like the Volunteers. I have seen dances in the houses on the Green; but then we were not asked, and it was dreadful to stand and look in at the windows, and hear the music. I am sure there were plenty of people there that were not a bit better than we were. That girl that teaches the little Smithards—a bit of a governess. Mamma said it was ridiculous having her, and not us—a little bit of a governess! Now *we* have never been required to do anything for our living. We have always been kept at

home, and have had everything we wanted. That makes a deal of difference; don't you think it does, Mr. Durant?"

"I am not very clever in such subjects. I have to work very hard for my living, Miss Sarah Jane."

"Have you now? I should not have thought it, you look so like a gentleman. I suppose it is the clothes," said Sarah Jane thoughtfully. "But even then," she added with magnanimous indulgence, "that is quite different; men may work without losing caste, mamma says, but not women. And we have always been kept at home. I would not be a governess for the world."

"I do not suppose it can be a pleasant occupation," said Durant.

"No, indeed. What are you, Mr. Durant? You don't teach, do you? I wish you had been in the army; I do so like officers, their manners are so nice. Here we are at home already, I declare. What a pity, we have had such a nice walk.

Mamma, here's Mr. Durant," she said, rushing into the little parlour; "and oh! look here, he is come to say that Arthur ain't at all rich—and that Nancy won't be my lady—and that it's all a mistake."

"What are you saying, Sarah Jane? Shut the door, can't you, and not shriek like that in the passage; should you like the girl to hear? I wonder at you, child. Good evening, Mr. Durant," said the mother, stiffly. She did not hold out her hand to him, or ask him to sit down, with the effusive hospitality of last night, but her daughters were more kind; Matilda lifted the paper with all her materials off the sofa to make room for him, and Sarah Jane dragged forth the most comfortable chair.

"This is the coolest place, Mr. Durant," she said. "Oh, isn't it warm here, with such a big fire? and it is quite a lovely morning, though there is a breeze; and Mr. Durant and I have had the most delightful walk!"

The former speech made the mother cold and Matilda kind; this had the reverse effect—Matilda froze and Mrs. Bates began to thaw. The gentleman who had taken a delightful walk with her youngest daughter, was not a man to be frowned upon. Who could tell what might come out of such a beginning? Mrs. Bates was governed by a different code of laws from those which move the careful mothers of other spheres. She was not afraid of delightful walks, or those meetings which are not always accidental; besides, was not the stranger Arthur's friend, and consequently no stranger at all?

"I am sure it is very good of Mr. Durant to take the trouble of talking to a little scatterbrain like you," she said; "but girls will be girls; we can't put old heads on young shoulders; and indeed, poor things, why shouldn't they be light-hearted? We haven't got much more than good spirits and good constitutions to give them, Mr. Durant."

"La, mamma! a great deal Mr. Durant must care for our spirits and our constitutions!" cried Matilda; "I daresay he has come about business, as Sarah Jane says. Was it something about Arthur, Sir? But you can't tell us anything that will hurt Arthur. We are so fond of him. We would not believe any harm of him, whatever you might say."

"I have no wish to say any harm of him," said Durant; "I may claim, indeed, to have more affection for him than a stranger can have. He has been like a brother to me."

"And I am sure he is very fond of you," said Mrs. Bates, "a gentleman couldn't be fonder of another gentleman than he is of you. But, of course, you know, Mr. Durant, when people are in love, they think of nothing else."

"Poor Curtis!" said Durant unawares. It was true enough that he "was fond of" his friend; and yet, for the sake of this girl, Arthur had quarrelled even with his

old companion. He felt a profound pity for him in his heart. What was he doing here, the foolish fellow—in this place, so unlike everything he had ever known?

"Well!" said Mrs. Bates, "I wouldn't say poor Curtis. So far as I have seen, 'tis a happy time. After, when the cares of the world come on, and there's not means enough, or so forth, I might call 'em poor; but not just now when everything is colour de rose. And, thank Heaven! there cannot be any trouble about means with dear Arthur. Sarah Jane says, you say he isn't rich? that may be, Mr. Durant. I don't look for wealth when young folks are happy together, and fond of each other. Money ain't everything, as I' always tell my girls."

"No," said Durant, taken aback. "I only thought, from what Miss Bates said, that you might be deceived in respect to Curtis's true position, that was all. Of course, he has excellent prospects; but

his father, Sir John, is comparatively a young man. He will flourish for the next twenty years, I hope. And as for the title, that of course—"

"Of course," said Mrs. Bates with dignity. "And I do hope Sir John will long be spared to his family. You must not take all that a silly girl says for Gospel. I think we are quite aware of Mr. Curtis's position, Mr. Bates and me. Naturally, we made inquiries. He is not rich, but he will have enough, I hope, to make a start—and my daughter has a little of her own."

"Oh, mamma! what's two hundred and fifty pounds?" said Matilda, "that's Nancy's fortune. It won't last long, will it, Mr. Durant? And Arthur hasn't got a business, or anything to help him to a living. I think it's very kind of Mr. Durant to come and tell us all this about Sir John."

"And"—said Durant pursuing his advantage, "I must speak plainly, though

it may not be pleasant. Sir John is not a man to take a lenient view of anything that appears like disobedience. I do not think it likely, pardon me for saying so, that the family will like the marriage. They do not know, for one thing, the excellence of Miss Nancy."

"Oh, Nancy!" said Matilda, under her breath, with a little toss of her head, and Sarah Jane laughed. Nancy was only Nancy after all, and as for excellence! Mrs. Bates took the matter differently, as may be supposed.

"I am not going to hear anyone talk disrespectful of my girl," she said. "She is as good a girl as ever breathed. I wish Sir John, or the Queen herself, may have as good, and that ain't a bad wish, Mr. Durant. She is one that would do credit to any family, though I say it that shouldn't. She's pretty and she's good, and knows her duty a deal better than most. Them that find fault with my Nancy, it's because they don't know what she is. Me and

her father could tell them a different story. She never was one to go after pleasure like the other two."

"Mamma!" said Matilda and Sarah Jane in a breath.

"Oh yes! I know what I am saying. You are good girls enough, but you're not like your sister. You were always the troublesome ones. You'd talk and laugh with anybody. You have got no proper pride. But Nancy has always kept herself to herself. However she got to be so fond of Arthur, I never could make out, for she was not one to take up with strangers; and never had any affair of the sort, nor so much as kept company with a gentleman in all her days, till she met with Arthur. Oh! my Nancy is a very uncommon girl, Mr. Durant. There are very few like her."

"I am quite ready to believe it," said Durant, proceeding on his remorseless career, though compunctions pricked him for what he was doing. "But Sir John

does not know Miss Nancy. And there is Lady Curtis to be taken into consideration."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bates, subdued for the moment, "I don't deny a lady may have prejudices. I know by myself—that time when Charley was supposed to be paying attention to—you remember, girls?—oh yes! a mother is to be considered. But still—we have no reason to think Lady Curtis is disagreeable, Mr. Durant, or will not hear reason. The time I am talking of, about Charley—I took my measures. I got a friend of mine to speak to the girl; and I met her myself—by accident like; and, I am glad to say, it all came to nothing," Mrs. Bates added with a sigh of relief.

"Then you perceive," said Durant, "that you felt exactly as Lady Curtis may be expected to feel."

"Yes—mothers is the same everywhere, I suppose," said Mrs. Bates, not

without complacance. "A little more money don't make much difference, Mr. Durant. If it was the Queen, a mother can't be more than a mother. And we're all alike, never out of anxiety one way or other—thinking of our children—a deal more than our children ever think of us," she added, shaking her head at her daughters with a sigh. "But I suppose that's the way of the world."

"Let us return to Lady Curtis," said the Devil's advocate. "She, you acknowledge, is likely to be prejudiced. You understand that, judging from the feelings with which you heard of Mr. Charley's entanglement—"

"It never went so far as an entanglement. Dear, no! you must not think it was so serious."

"But this is very serious, Mrs. Bates. Curtis has settled everything to marry your daughter—so he tells me—and what will Lady Curtis think? She does not know Miss Nancy, nor you. She will think these

are some designing people who have caught my son—"

At this there was a universal outcry, through which, however, Durant threaded his way with composure, notwithstanding the threatening and angry glances which surrounded him on every side.

"Designing people," he repeated, "who have caught my son. You don't suppose I think so, who know you? But Lady Curtis does not know you—and there is a certain difference between your rank and theirs. It is, vulgarly speaking, a good match for Miss Nancy. I am speaking from their point of view—this is how they *must* think of it, you know. In their rank of life, people generally meet and consult over a marriage. One man's son does not marry another man's daughter on the same level of society, without a great many consultations over it, and advances from one to the other. The young lady has to be introduced to her future husband's family, and all the steps

towards the marriage are taken jointly. But there has been nothing of the kind in this case. The Curtises have not even been informed of it. They found it out by chance. Fancy then, Mrs. Bates, what their feelings must be? They find themselves deceived and defied by their son; and they find that you are quite willing to allow him to marry your daughter without the slightest communication with his family—"

"Mr. Durant," said Mrs. Bates, whimpering, "who gave you any right to come like this and insult us? What have we done to you that you dare to speak so? Oh! it is well seen that my husband is out, and we have no one to protect us, girls. But I say it is mean to come here in the morning, when there's no one to stand up for us, and trample upon women. I say it's a poor sort of thing to do. You daren't do it—no, he daren't do it—if your papa was here."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, mother,"

said Matilda, "what could father do? Is he the one to take care of anybody? Mr. Durant, look here, I don't think you're any way against us, are you? It's in kindness that you're talking, ain't it? I can't think that a gentleman would come into a house, if it was the house of poor folks, like this might be, and put on a show of being friendly—and mean different. Folks learn a deal in this world," said the young woman, pushing away her bonnet-making, and looking at him more and more keenly with rising suspicion; "but without you owned to it, I wouldn't believe that."

"Miss Bates!" faltered Durant, rising to his feet. He grew crimson under her honest straightforward look. It was honest and straightforward, notwithstanding that there must, he felt, have been a certain double-dealing, more or less, about Arthur; but he was in no position now to find fault with the double-dealing of others —had he not acted equivocally himself?

"I did not mean to deceive you," he said, faltering. "I did not mean to conceal from you that I was the friend of the Curtis family. I have never said I approved of the marriage. I have naturally looked upon it from their point of view."

"He never said anything different," said Sarah Jane, crying in sympathy with her mother. "He never said he was our friend. This is what he has been saying to me since ever I met him. As if nobody was ladies but those that are rich! and as if the rest of the world was dirt—as if we cared for his Curtises and his fine folks!"

"If it is on account of the family you care, Mr. Durant," said Matilda, more moderate, "it would be better if you said it straight out."

"I beg your pardon," he said, recovering himself, "it was not necessary. I am not the agent of that family—nor am I the enemy of this family. But the

marriage is very unsuitable, as any man may see; it ought to be opposed. What happiness can come of it? Judge for yourselves. Curtis can't do anything for his living, as Miss Bates says; and your daughter's little money, what is it? And if they marry, they will be altogether dependent on Sir John, who does not like it—who goes further than that—hates it, and is furious with his son. He would cut him off with a shilling, if he could. But anyhow, he can stop his allowance; he would throw them on their own resources—and then what would they do? You have always kept her at home your daughter tells me; so that she could do nothing to help. And he could do nothing—what could he do? He has always been used to live expensively. Mrs. Bates, if you let it go on, I am very sorry for you. The most likely thing that can happen is, that they will be dependent on you."

"Dependent on us!" this was such a

dreadful suggestion, that all lesser impulses of offence were forgotten. They gathered round him in tremulous anxiety. "You don't mean to say, Mr. Durant, that they would leave him without a penny? I am speaking to you like a friend," said Mrs. Bates, "I am not particular to ask if you meant it or not. Would they leave him without a penny?—a young man with all his extravagant ways."

"Would not you do it yourself, if you thought it would stop such a marriage?" said Durant.

CHAPTER VI.

DURANT felt that he had done a good morning's work. He had succeeded in frightening Mrs. Bates, and striking with alarm the sensible mind of Matilda, and the frivolous one of Sarah Jane. He left them in different stages of perplexity and distress when he came away. They were not more selfish than other people; but the idea of Nancy's marriage, which they had been so proud of in anticipation, coming to nothing, or coming to so much worse than nothing as to throw the "young couple" on their hands, naturally appalled them. Arthur had, which, perhaps, was also natural, told them as

little as possible about his family; he had slurred vaguely over all details of how he and his bride were to live. He had plenty for both, he said; there would be quite enough to give his Nancy everything her heart could desire. What could they wish for more? The daughter of a tax-collector is not usually burdened with very elaborate marriage settlements.

"I hope your papa and mamma will be pleased," Mrs. Bates had said, when she had received the intimation of the betrothal, bestowing on her future son-in-law a tearful kiss, which he bore like a hero.

"Oh, no fear of them; they will be pleased when they see Nancy," he had replied; and with this assurance she had been content.

As the time fixed for the marriage approached, no doubt there had been searchings of heart on the subject; but these were rather directed to the question, whether or not he would have any of

his family asked to the wedding than to anything more important. Arthur was four-and-twenty, surely old enough to choose for himself, and the idea of consulting the father and mother (it being evident that they were not very likely to be satisfied with the marriage) did not occur to these good folks. A young tax-collector would not think of consulting his family, though he might like them to be pleased; and why should a baronet's son, a young gentleman, much more his own master than any tax-collector, be bound to what his father and mother wished? Mr. Bates, who had a great respect for the powers that be, had, indeed, grumbled a fear that "they mightn't like it;" but "Who cares?" had been the answer of his bolder spouse. She remembered this now with a little horror.

"Your father is slow," she said to her girls; "and sometimes we're all impatient, as we didn't ought to be; but it's wonderful how often he's right, is papa."

The girls scouted the idea in words, but in their hearts they too were somewhat impressed, and the little parlour was full of agitation all the morning. Nancy was out, as the day was so fine, with her lover. They had so nearly quarrelled on the previous night, that their morning meeting was more interesting than usual, and they had gone out to make it up. There was a common not far off, with stretches of gorse and little thickets of half-grown trees, which was the resort of all lovers in the neighbourhood; and there they had been spending the morning in the midst of the autumnal sunshine, declaring to each other that nothing should ever come between them again, neither enemies nor friends.

Durant went home to his inn, very well pleased with himself, though with a qualm of compunction which he had not expected to feel. On the whole, these people were not designing people. They were not the harpies of the social imagina-

tion, who pounce upon the hapless *fils de famille*, and crunch his bones. That did not make them in the smallest degree more suitable to be connected with Arthur, but it made his friend a little ashamed of the part he was playing. And at the same time he was satisfied; for he did not want Arthur to make this foolish marriage, and he wanted very much to please Lady Curtis, for reasons which will be disclosed hereafter. He felt he had done a good day's work, though, perhaps, it was not work of a very noble kind. He did not believe in the least that the Curtis family would sentence their son to starvation, or to be dependent on the house of Bates, though he made use of that idea to subjugate the latter; but Nature revenged herself upon him for this lie by permitting him to believe another, which was that these proceedings of his could have some influence in retarding Arthur's marriage. Though he ought to have known that the obstacles thus set up would, on the contrary,

make Arthur doubly eager, and lead him to force on everything, a little mist of complacent delusion was over his eyes in respect to his own adroitness, and he really believed that it might be in his power to save Arthur. And then if he saved Arthur, what might not Lady Curtis be disposed to do? Not, poor Durant, the same thing over again, by bestowing her daughter, of whom she was much more proud than she had ever been of Arthur, upon a poor, if rising barrister. No, that was not likely, and he knew it was not likely; but yet he had a certain vague faith in it which impelled him to do anything to please her; and he thought what he had done would please her. He thought he had produced some effect. There was a glow of comfortable sensation in his mind. If, perhaps, he had been not quite kind, not quite just to the poor people he had just quitted, what claim had they upon his kindness? None whatever; and it was all perfectly legitimate, perfectly fair. Were they not

coming out of their natural sphere, clutching at the Baronet's son for their daughter, publicly boasting the time when Nancy should be my lady? And was not any way of putting an end to this fair and defensible? He had done nothing that it was not quite allowable to do.

In this frame of mind he ate his luncheon, and decided to stay another night at Underhayes. It was rather hard, indeed, to know what to do with himself in the afternoon; but he hoped that perhaps Arthur might change his mind, might think it worth while to come to him and argue the point; and in any arguing of the point, Durant felt that he must be successful. Then he had a bundle of correspondence to get through. A busy man is often entirely thrown out of his mental gear by finding himself shut up in a bare parlour in an inn, without any of his habitual tools, without books or papers. But he had letters to write, which was always an occupation; and one of his letters was

to Lady Curtis. Before he could do this, however, it was necessary that he should get paper; and the day was so mild, and the air so sweet, and the appearance of the little place so pleasant, that he went out with an agreeable sense that his business was not pressing, and that he might linger before coming in.

As Durant went out of the inn, however, he was run against by some one coming in, in hot haste, and with every appearance of impatience and impetuosity.

"I want to speak to a Mr. Durant that is staying here," she said to the waiter; then, stopping short with a start, turned her attention to himself. "I think you are Mr. Durant," she said.

It was Nancy Bates in person. Though he had seen her but vaguely on the previous night, he recognised her now. Her hat looked as if it had been put on hurriedly, and a long lock of brown hair had dropped upon her shoulder. Durant

could not but notice how long it was, and how soft and shining it looked—not golden or red, but shining, glossy brown. It caught his eye, even in the midst of the shock he experienced on hearing her ask for him. What did she want with him? He felt himself shrink in spirit, if not in outward appearance. Arthur he had been striving to save, his conscience was clear in that respect; but this young woman, what had his intention been so far as she was concerned? It was not to save her he had been trying, but to break her heart, if she happened to have one, and anyhow, heart or none, destroy her prospects, and steal away her supposed good fortune. Therefore, he could not help it, he shrank a little from Nancy; and there was a haste and hostile energy in her looks which added to this feeling. He answered, almost in a tone of deprecation,

"Yes, that is my name; and I think it is Miss Bates?"

"Anna Bates," she said, with a little elevation of her head, as if the name she pronounced had been one of imposing importance. "I want to speak to you, please."

Durant was entirely taken back. He looked at her with an air of helpless bewilderment. What was he to do? Ask her to go back to his sitting-room with him? ask her to go with him outside? He did not know what was etiquette in such regions. No young woman with whom he was acquainted had ever called upon him before, and the young man was utterly puzzled and discomfited, and did not know what to do.

"Surely," he said, hesitating between the stair and the door, with a helpless look at the waiter, who might, he thought, have made some suggestion.

That it was wrong to come to Mr. Durant "on business," and business so urgent, had never crossed Nancy's mind before; but she saw that he thought so,

and this discovery, instead of abashing her, fired her with new vehemence. The very wonder in his face was as a flag of aristocratic superiority to Nancy, and made her wild.

"You are surprised," she said, with a look of scorn, "that I should come to you; but I am not one of your fine ladies that send for people to come to them; and there is no room in our house for private talks. You can speak to me in the street, I suppose."

And with this she turned her back upon him and hurried out. Here she paused a moment, seeing, perhaps, for the first time, the difficulties of an indignant demand for explanations upon Underhayes Green, in the face of all the people who were coming out on their afternoon walks, and calling and business. None of these difficulties had ever troubled Nancy before. The inconvenient splendour of being a person whose proceedings were watched, had never attended her before. But now

it all flashed upon her in a moment. Already it was known in the place that she was going to marry, or rather to be married by Mr. Curtis, and if she was seen at three o'clock in the afternoon walking about the Green in close conversation with another "gentleman," what would everybody say? Very different had been Sarah Jane's feelings, who only hoped everybody she knew might see her walking with the "gentleman." Already the shadow of her new position had come over Nancy, and the sense that observation now would be degrading rather than flattering. She had not thought about it at all in the fervour of her feelings, when she rushed out impetuously to confront her adversary, but she perceived it through her adversary's eyes. She turned half-round to him, and waving her hand towards the other side of the Green, where there was a little bit of shade with trees, went on before him, rapidly crossing the grass. Durant followed. He was nervous about what was

going to happen to him; to take him thus under the damp trees, from which a shower of leaves fell at every puff of air, was very much like dragging him to some den were he could be devoured at leisure. Could Arthur be there? but on reflection he felt sure that Arthur, had he known, would have found some means of subduing this impetuosity, and preventing an encounter. It could not be for Arthur's interest in any way. Before however they had got across the Green, Durant's fright had subsided; he began to be interested; the situation was piquant, if no more; and that lock of brown hair was very pretty. He would have thought it untidy in Sarah Jane, but here somehow it looked well. He thought of the "sweet neglect" of Herrick's description; the tempestuous petticoat occurred to him in spite of himself, and he began to be half pleased, half excited by this odd adventure. What would Arthur say if he saw him being thus carried off for a private interview?

and the direct course which the impetuous young woman was taking, brought them immediately in front of Mr. Eagle's gate. The little line of trees which looked like a Mall in the distance, lay under his garden walls, and it turned out to be of much less importance than he thought—a sweep of some old avenue, a hundred yards or so of path between two fine ranges of elms. It led nowhere, and was quite deserted. A better place for a mysterious interview could scarcely be.

When they had got under the shade of the trees, she turned upon him suddenly.

"You were at our house to-day," she said; "you were saying a great many things about—Mr. Curtis's family. Did they send you, or what right have you to speak for them? I want to know."

"Miss Bates, you are very hasty—very peremptory."

"I am no different from what I have a right to be," she said, and he could hear that her voice trembled with passion, and

see that the lines of her face were moving, and that there were tears which looked more like fire than water in her eyes.

"What do you mean by coming and setting my folks against—Mr. Curtis? You pretend to be a friend of his. What do you do it for? And what right have you to interfere with me?"

"None in the world," said Durant, hastily; "none in the world! nor do I. I told your mother the truth about the Curtises, as I thought I was bound to do."

"Why were you bound to do it? *I* did not ask you to give us any information. You might have consulted me first, or—Mr. Curtis. If we were willing to have nothing said about them, to have nothing to do with them, was that your business? Don't you think it's like a busy-body—a meddler, Mr. Durant? I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself!" she said, the passion getting vent, and the tears falling hot and sudden in spite of herself out of

her eyes. "You, a gentleman! if it had been a silly gossip of a woman, I should not have been surprised."

This, as may be supposed, galled Durant immensely, for what can be harder upon a man than to be called like a gossip and a woman? But he had command of himself.

"I am distressed," he said, "to have caused any annoyance; I had no intention of doing so."

"Then what was your intention?" she said; "I suppose you had one. It will be honester to tell me directly what you mean."

"I have no objection to tell you what I mean," he said, "as I told your mother. The Curtises are my friends. I know them thoroughly, and I know that your marriage will grieve them to the heart. Pardon me if I must speak plainly. It is no offence to you personally, for they don't know you. Arthur has told them the step he is going to take only at the

last moment; only, in fact, after they had been told of it from another source. They are deeply offended, as may be easily supposed. He has not behaved to them as he ought."

"You will say nothing against Mr. Curtis, please."

"But I must say something about him—Arthur! Have you any idea, Miss Bates, what Arthur has been to me? My companion since he was *that* height; my younger brother, my charge; nay, almost my child. And you tell me I am not to speak of him! Is it possible, do you think? My affection for Arthur gives me a right to say anything to him—or of him."

"There is no one in the world," she said, with her lips quivering, "who has so much right to him as me."

Durant threw up his shoulders and his hands in the excitement of the moment. "So it appears," he said, "so I suppose—though how it should be so, God knows,

is the last of mysteries. Well! let us say he belongs to you, and that not his oldest friend, not his nearest relation, has a right to discuss him if you forbid. It is the wildest madness, but I suppose, as you say, it is true. And what then, Miss Bates? he will have *you*, but he will have nothing besides. Everyone else will be separated from him; his parents not only offended, but wounded to the heart; his friends alienated, his position lost. What will he be then, and what will he do? A man cannot be a lover and nothing else all his life. He would tire of that, and you would tire of it; but he will have nothing to fall back upon; and after all, if a man defies his parents and throws off their influence, why should they exert themselves to secure to him the means of defying them? They will not do it—why should they? and you will find that you have married poverty—helplessness—discontent."

"And if I do," she said, "will that

show I am marrying for money? You bad man! You cruel friend! You go and tell everybody that it is because he will be rich—because I shall be my lady—that I am going to marry Arthur. How dare you! how dare you! But if this is how it is going to be, you will all find out different; you will find it is not for his money or for his rank. Go away!" she cried, clenching a hand which was small but strong, and full of impassioned energy; "go away! and don't tell lies of me."

Durant was impressed in spite of himself; he tried to smile, but could not, and he tried to be angry, but could not refrain from a certain half-respect, half-admiration.

"I tell no lies of you or anyone," he said; "I warn you—"

"Warn me! of what? that I shall have a way of showing whether I'm true or not," she said, "whether I'm good or not; and you think that will frighten *me!* Mr. Durant, if his mother sent you, you may

go back and tell her what I say. You've dared me to give him up, and I won't give him up; and if I were to give him up a hundred times it would make no difference, for he would not give up me. You can tell her all that. He can do without her, but he can't do without me."

"Do you think that is a kind thing to tell a mother?"

"I don't care," said Nancy, "you have said worse to me; and it's true—and so it's always true. I'd tell my own mother the same. What's a mother? they didn't choose to have us; they didn't pick us out of the world; and now that we're here we've got to do the best we can for ourselves. You may go where you like upon your missions, Mr. Durant, but not here—you shan't come here; and if you come till doomsday you wouldn't do any good, for they put more trust in me—and so they ought—than in a cunning lawyer like you. We know what lawyer means," said the excited girl, once more shaking her

small clenched fist in his face, "liar! and that's seen in you."

With this she turned and walked suddenly away, turning the corner of the high garden wall, and disappearing in a whirlwind of excitement and emotion, while he stood thunderstruck, staring after her. Durant stood still and stared, with his mouth open in the extremity of his surprise. He was too much startled even to be angry; but he was discomfited, there was no mistaking that sensation. As he stood looking after the excited girl, a sense of smallness, almost of baseness, came over him. He had wanted to save Arthur, but he had not taken the other human creature into consideration, who was just as important as Arthur to the world; and he had not realized the kind of being he had to deal with, when he had drawn up his own brief, as it were, and instructed himself in the line of argument to be pursued. Lawyer, liar! that was a sharp thorn. He was able to smile feebly

at it, as he picked himself up and went slowly back to his inn; but he could not shake off the sense of failure—the sense of smallness and meanness that had come over him. Not only had he found a foeman worthy of his steel, but she had baffled him and put him to shame even in his own eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

NOR were Durant's troubles over for that day. In the evening another tempest came upon him. He had finished his solitary dinner, and written his letter to Lady Curtis, which was considerably changed from what it was intended to be. He had meant to say that he was in great hopes of having succeeded in his attempt to convince the Bates' that it was not for their interest to allow Arthur to marry their daughter; but after his interview with Nancy, he could not say this. On the contrary, he gave a description of her future daughter-in-law, which was very much more favourable to that young

woman than anyone could have expected.

"She has a great deal of character," he wrote. "She is not vulgur by nature, nor devoid of intelligence. If things come to the worst, something may be made of her."

This was not very satisfactory to Lady Curtis, who would almost rather have heard that her son was about to marry a demon incarnate, who would disgust him sooner or later, and from whom even yet he might be driven. So that poor Durant had doubly lost his work.

He was finishing this letter when his door was opened suddenly, and Arthur Curtis came in unannounced. He was quite pale, with eyes which gleamed red and angry, and an air of furious calm—passion at the white stage to which no utterance would suffice. He came in, closed the door behind him, and then coming forward, dashed his clenched hand upon the table.

"Look here," he said, "I'll have none of your interference, Durant. Friend you may be, if you like, but dictator to me never—no, I cannot put up with it, and I won't. What has come to you that you can steal into people's houses and try to deceive a lot of silly women? That is not the sort of thing that used to suit you."

"I have deceived nobody," said Durant, getting red in spite of himself. "It is you who have deceived them."

"Yes, that's it, isn't it?—the argument suits the conduct," said Arthur, with a sneer. "'It is not me, it is you,'—the very thing I should have expected to be said; but look here, Durant, if you come between her and me again, if you try to make mischief with her family, if you get me into further trouble, I'll—by Jove, I'll—"

"What will you do?" said Durant, rising, restored to his self-possession, and looking the other steadily in the face.

They stood within a few paces of each other, the one aggressive and furious, the other calm, but excited. They had never had a break before since childhood, and had stood by each other in all kinds of difficulties. This was in Durant's mind, and made the crisis more bitter to him; but Arthur was too much excited to think of it, or of anything else but his grievance. Notwithstanding this, however, the calm look of the familiar face confronting him stilled the young man. He turned away after a moment, and took to angry pacing about the room.

"You!" he cried, "You! If anyone had told me that you would not stand by me in a difficulty, would not be my help in any trouble, I should not have believed it. It would have seemed impossible; and that you should take up arms *against* me —against *me!—you*, Durant!"

"Arthur," said his friend, with great emotion, "let us speak plainly. You must always be to me, when you are in

difficulty, the first person to be thought of. I cannot believe, any more than you can, in circumstances where I should not stand by you; but listen! you are not in difficulty now—you are on the verge, as I think, of a great mistake. Nothing can be more different. As your friend is bound to help you in trouble, so is he bound by every rule to do his best to extricate you now."

"To extricate me!" cried Arthur, with scorn. "From what? From love, happiness, and honour? Are these things from which to extricate a man? And not only so, but to work by underhand means to force me out of the position I have chosen, and which, whatever you may think of it, is Heaven to me."

"I have been working by no underhand means."

"What else can you call it? You might have said what you would to me. You were free to say what you liked; but to attack them—behind my back—"

"Arthur," said Durant, "it is useless to evade the matter; this is exactly one of those moments which are often fatal to friendship. You think you are on the eve of happiness. I think you are securing your own misery. Am I to help you to destroy yourself? do you think that is a duty of friendship? or is it not rather my part, by every possible means, to stop you before you go over the precipice?"

"Your very words are an insult," said Arthur; "to me, and to one who is more precious to me than myself."

"Yet I suppose I may have my opinion," said Durant. "You cannot forbid me that. I say nothing against anybody. I only say this will be fatal to you, and it seems to me, if I could hinder it—"

"You can no more hinder it than you can keep the sun from rising to-morrow."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Arthur. I

would give a great deal if I could. Think what a change it will make in your life. You will not take your degree now. As for diplomacy, you are shut out from that—it would be impossible. So will Parliament be and the public life you once thought of. Your own business of a country gentleman you are kept from while your father lives. You have no time for anything else. Where will be your shooting, your fishing, your hunting in the season, your society? You will have to live on your allowance, sparely, economically, without a horse, without a margin. Everything given up for—what?"

"For *her*—for happiness—for everything that makes life worth having."

"For happiness? I don't know much about it, Arthur; it has not come my way. Is it object enough for a man's life? When you live for happiness, are you happy? I ask for information. Myself, I get on well enough, but I have

never made any great exertion for such an object. Will it answer the purpose? will it repay the cost?"

"You are trying to cheat me out of my just indignation," said Arthur, "are we on such a footing at this moment as to discuss the position in your cool way? Oh, I confess it is cleverly done! you resume the old tone, you go back to the habit of many a discussion. But at present this will not do. There is something more urgent in hand."

"Why should it not do? You are vexed that I have spoken to the Bates family; but after all, as I have been routed horse and foot by the young lady herself, and ordered off the field of battle—"

"You acknowledge that!" said Arthur subdued, "ah, I thought you were more sensible than you give yourself credit for being. She is grand when she is excited. Well, Durant, I suppose it is of no use grumbling with you. You know me, when

we have quarrelled I always want to make it up to-morrow. I can't do without you, old fellow; that is not what I came to say; but it is too strong for me. I want you, Durant; you have always stood by me. It does not feel natural that you should be on the other side."

"I am not on the other side," said Durant with compunction. There were some things in his letter to Lady Curtis which recurred to him, and gave him a choking sensation. His intentions had been friendly, but his acts— Well! as they had been altogether unsuccessful they did not matter much; and he too felt it difficult to resist the familiar face and tone. If he could have done any good;—but as this was impossible, why make a painful breach? He held out his hand to his friend. "Look here, Arthur," he said with a smile, "what is the good of fighting? If I could stop your marriage I would do it; but apparently I can't; I don't conceal from you that I am very

sorry; but if you do this very foolish thing, it seems a pity that you should lose a friend too."

Arthur did not take the hand held out to him; but he sat down somewhat sullenly on the opposite side of the table, and then there ensued a pause, for neither knew what to say.

"I am going back to town to-morrow," said Durant, "I will not undertake to further your prospects; but if you wish any communication made—to take off the edge of the unkindness, Arthur—"

"Unkindness! I have done no unkindness."

"What—to settle all this without any reference to them, without explanation, without trying to secure their sympathy, their approval—"

"Approval! that was a likely thing; what was the use of making appeals or giving explanations? Here is an example; the moment they do hear, they send you primed and prepossessed against it. I

answered their questions; but I knew it was useless, and why should I humiliate myself—and *her?* When it is irrevocable and can't be altered, I always intended to let them know the whole, and throw myself upon their mercy."

"It is clear you expect more magnanimity from them than they have found in you."

"Well," said Arthur coolly, "a man must have queer parents if he does not take that for granted. They do put up with things when they can't help themselves. What is the good of worrying them with opposition (which it was clear they must make) and which could only irritate both parties? No, it was not done by inadvertence, it was done advisedly. If you never learned, old fellow, the advantage of doing a thing without permission rather than in the face of a prohibition—it makes all the difference," said Arthur with a sudden hoarse laugh, which ended as suddenly as it began, and

had anything but humour in the sound of it. "No, I have no instructions to give you, I will write as soon as— well, after we are married; why should I do anything before?"

"Arthur, for God's sake!" cried his friend, "pause still, think what you are doing."

"That is enough, that is enough! don't risk our friendship once again, just after it has been renewed; and as you say, if I am going to do anything so very imprudent, at least don't let me lose my friend too," he said, looking at Durant, with eyes which laughed, yet were not far off from tears, and grasping his hand hurriedly. "I'm glad we are not parting for ever, old boy, as I almost feared: though I should not wonder if the next morning after we had parted for ever, I had knocked you up to tell you what folly it was. A dozen years are not done away with so easily, are they? after all."

They stood grasping each others hands for a moment, both too much affected

for words. Was there a softening, a yielding in Arthur's breast? were the ties of the familiar life he knew of old, the faithful and tried affections, family, friends, home, coming back upon him, surging over the hot passion of the new? Durant held him fast for a moment longer than his friend's grasp held, then with a sigh let his hand drop. He would not venture to raise all the question again. It must be left to reason, to his own heart, to— well, at the last, to that guidance of God which when everything fails we can trust or mistrust as the case may be. Evidently there was nothing more for friendship to do or say. And what could with justice have been done or said, Durant asked himself as he dropped wearily into his seat again after Arthur had gone? Could any one hope or expect that the guidance of God would lead him to break the most sacred pledge a man could give? If he did so his family might rejoice, but what could anyone, even those most re-

lieved by it, think of Arthur? He might escape ruin, but by what? falsehood. And which was worst? Could any man dare to go to him and say—Throw off those vows you have repeated so often, cast aside this other creature as dear to heaven as yourself, whom you have persuaded of your love, break her heart, spoil her life, and then return spotless, an honourable man, to your own? If such an adviser could be, Durant felt that he was incapable of the effort: he felt even that with his respect his very love for Arthur would evaporate were he to know him capable of such treachery and baseness. And yet this was what he had been urging on him! No wonder that the young lover, being a true man, was indignant. Yet, notwithstanding, it was ruin for Arthur, of that there could be as little doubt. This girl, so high-spirited, so pretty, so young, so attractive in a hundred ways, would be his destruction, separating him from his own original and natural place,

cutting short his career, neutralizing all his advantages. Alas for love, the love of the poets! At what a sacrifice was this young man purchasing that crown of life! at the cost of his home, his future, the very use that was in him as a man. Yet not all these considerations would justify the betrayal of the creature who loved him, or the breaking of his faith. In this dilemma his friend could but keep silent even from thought, with a certain shame of himself and horror of his own efforts, notwithstanding that he had been right in making them, which is one of the most wonderful of human paradoxes. His heart was heavy for Arthur going gaily to his destruction. Yet had he saved himself at this eleventh hour, what could anyone have thought of Arthur? Durant could not but feel a sensation of relief that he was not so brave and so wise.

Next morning he left Underhayes, without seeing anything more either of the

lovers, or the little group which surrounded them; but not without another amusing reminder of the responsibilities he had incurred by interfering. He had no object in going to London by that expeditious morning train which carried off all the business men. He watched them once more, streaming along, neat and cheerful, with cherished rosebuds in their button-holes—rosebuds beyond the reach of the rest of the world; and when the place was clear and the express gone, started leisurely for a less crowded train. It did not occur to him to notice a quick decisive step coming up behind him, as he went to the station. It was not Arthur's springy rapid step, which might have roused him; but one heavier and more decided. Durant however was much startled by finding himself struck lightly but sharply upon the shoulder, as the owner of this footstep came up to him. "Mr. Durant," said Mr. Eagles, "why is not Curtis with you? I told

you that I expected you to take away your man. Why do you let him slip through your fingers? I can't have him here."

"I told you, Mr. Eagles, that I had no authority over Curtis."

"No one has any authority; there is no such thing nowadays: call it influence if you like, I don't mind names—but take him away. He is doing no good with me. Never did after the first week. Dilettante fellow, fond of classical reading; that's not the sort of thing I care for, Mr. Durant. When a man comes to me he comes to work, whether he likes it or not. I am not half sure that I don't prefer them when they dislike it, triumph of principle then. Curtis is worse than doing no good, as I told you, he is doing himself harm. What do you mean to do about this business? Is he to be allowed to make a fool of himself and destroy all his prospects?"

"I must repeat that I have no au-

thority over Arthur Curtis," said Durant, "I am only his friend and schoolfellow. You know how little a man will allow his friend to interfere in such a matter."

"On the contrary, I know they are the only people who can interfere. Parents might as well—whistle. I scarcely wonder at that: if one may say so broadly of so large a class, there is not a greater nuisance than parents; and in this sort of business they're hopeless. But a man like himself, knowing all the consequences —why, no one could speak with so much authority."

"What would you advise me to say to him?" said Durant, with a kind of half hope that this sharp and energetic intelligence might strike out some new suggestion, tempered by an inclination to laugh and flout at any solution he might offer of the difficulty. "For myself I am at my wits' end."

"Say to him!" said the little peda-

gogue with a snort and puff of fiery resolution. "I'd take him away, I should not waste words. I'd have him out of the place before the day was over. There's nothing like isolation in any bad disease."

"There are difficulties," said Durant, "to make him go in the first place is not easy; and there is perhaps a claim of honour—I don't know how to advise him to cancel his word."

"Honour! word!" said Mr. Eagles, in successive snorts, "I can see how well qualified you are for the business. Fiddlesticks! a little money afterwards would salve all that. Is he to ruin himself for the sake of his word—to Bates the tax-collector's daughter!" The force of ridicule seemed incapable of going further. "I will not resort to your advice, Mr. Durant, no offence, when any of my men are in trouble."

"Thanks, I hope you will not," said Durant, nettled; and so rushed to his

train in considerable indignation and excitement. His word to Bates's daughter! was not that as good as his word to a Duchess? the young man asked himself. He was near becoming Arthur's advocate instead of his adversary. And if Lady Curtis assailed him as Mr. Eagles had done, what should he say to her? Must he lose all hopes of pleasing the family in consequence of this moral dilemma? Durant had no hope that any pleasure he could do to the family would ever really influence them towards the granting of his own private wishes which had never been breathed in any ear. He knew, in short, as well as a man can know by conviction of the understanding, that these wishes were absolutely hopeless, and that nothing he could do to propitiate the family would really tell upon them. But nevertheless he clung to the hope of proving himself useful, of doing something which would conciliate and dispose them towards him. Foolish young

man ! and what if Nancy Bates with her impetuous indignation, her self-confidence, her strong satisfaction in Arthur's poverty, which would prove her disinterestedness, should spoil it all ?

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE has gone; he will never trouble you any more, and I hope you will forgive him, dear, for my sake. Poor old Durant, he has always looked after me, and bullied me. When I was at Eton first, I was his fag. I don't think he can forget that."

"I daresay not," said Nancy, "he thinks he should always have the upper hand. He thinks you should never have any friends but of his choosing. And then he will go and tell stories about us all to your father and mother."

"I don't think, perhaps, you do him quite justice," said Arthur, musing, with

a flush on his face. "Old Durant is not like that. The worst he has to say, he will say to yourself, not behind your back; and he will not gossip about you."

"He is free to gossip as much as ever he likes, so far as I am concerned; but I don't like those sort of people—and give into them I would not—not for the world!"

"Mr. Durant is gone, is he?" said Sarah Jane, in a voice of dismay. "You are so selfish you two! What harm was he doing? I am sure he was very nice. What did you send him away for? It is so like you, Nancy, blazing up into one of your fits, and never thinking of spoiling other people's fun—what you always do."

"Hillo!" said Arthur, half amused, half angry, "what has Durant to do with other people's fun? He is not at all a funny person so far as I can see."

"Oh! he may not show it to you, but Mr. Durant is very good company," said

Sarah Jane with a toss of her head. "He is not so dreadfully ancient that you should call him Old Durant; and I am sure if he likes to come back here, I shall be very glad for one. And I think he will too," said the girl, elevating her foolish but not unpretty nose. It was of the tip-tilted order, and could express a great deal of half-saucy piquant self-confidence. Arthur stared at her blankly with a painful sort of offence coming over him. It made him quite unreasonably angry that this foolish girl should suppose that Durant—*Durant*, of all people in the world! was interested in her pink prettiness—the idea quite shocked him. He whispered to Nancy, in the corner, a little admonition.

"You should not let that girl talk so," he said. "To hear her chatter of Durant! It is like a magpie and an eagle. You, who have so much more sense, you should not let her do so. It makes one angry in spite of oneself."

This was a whisper in the confidence of their closeness and oneness; but Nancy replied aloud, "Why shouldn't she chatter about Durant if she pleases. He is no better than she is. Magpie, indeed! you are very uncivil, Arthur. I think my sister is quite as good as your friend—even if it was a nicer friend than Durant."

"Did he say I was a magpie?" said Sarah Jane. "Oh, Nancy! and me always standing up for him. I did to Durant himself. I said we are all very fond of Arthur, we'll none of us believe any harm of Arthur. Oh! and to call me a magpie! I could not have believed it of him," and the girl shed a shower of facile tears.

"You see this is how it acts," said Nancy. "Durant comes here and tries to make mischief, and you tell me no, he has done nothing wrong; it is only his mistaken ideas; he will say nothing to other people half so bad as he says to our-

selves. That is all very well, Arthur; but when I see to the contrary, you yourself insulting my family for the sake of Durant!"—

"My darling," said Arthur, humbly, "don't, I beseech you!—don't if you care for me, say Durant!"

"What should I say?" cried Nancy, more and more roused. "Mr. Durant, my Lord Durant, perhaps? Oh let's be respectful, Sarah Jane! We didn't know that it was royalty that was coming. Arthur is humble enough himself, but the moment we set up to be as good as his friend, then it shows. And I should like to know why we are to be on our knees to *Mister* Durant? Why shouldn't Sally have her fun out of him if she likes? Oh, let me alone, mother! don't go on winking and nodding at me. Arthur may take offence if he pleases, he may take himself off altogether if he pleases—what do I care? Do you think I am going to lie down for his family to tread over and

spit upon, and all his friends? Not I! If he expects that, he has reckoned without Nancy—and that he'll soon see."

"Oh, Arthur, don't mind her," cried Mrs. Bates, "she's just in one of her tantrums. Most times Nancy is as gentle as a lamb, but when she's roused, she's roused; and you'll allow it's aggravating. Not but Mr. Durant was very civil spoken, I haven't a word to say against him. Indeed, I rather liked him, what I saw of him. You're both too touchy, that's what it is; Nancy can't bear her sister to be set down as if she was nobody, and Arthur don't like any joking about his friend. But there, there now, kiss and be friends, children! If you quarrel you only make each other miserable, and get miserable yourself. The night before last and last night were both spoiled with it. Don't you go on, now he's gone."

"I have no wish to go on," said Arthur, rather gloomily. He had risen

from the side of his betrothed, and was walking up and down, biting his nails, which was a way he had. Certainly there was no reason in the world why he should be so sensitive about Durant. Durant's social pretensions were much beneath his own and he had found his fate in this humble place; why should every vein tingle with the idea that Durant, who was only the Bond Street saddler's grandson after all, should flirt with Sarah Jane? But nature is unreasonable. Right or wrong, the suggestion filled him with ridiculous annoyance and disgust.

"Well, mother," said Nancy, "if my sister is not to be allowed to joke about his friend, why should he pretend to be in love with me? Sarah Jane is as good as I am. She's just the same as I am. She's younger, and most folks think she's prettier. If Durant is too good for her, it stands to reason that *he* is too good for me."

"For Heaven's sake let there be an

end of this!" cried Arthur. "You don't know the effect your words have upon me. They make me ill, they make me wretched. I say nothing against Sarah Jane. I never have been the least negligent, the least disrespectful of your sister."

"No, indeed," said Sarah Jane, who was good-nature itself, "Arthur has never got on the high-horse to me. He's always been kind. It's nothing worth talking about. A deal of folks are touchy about their friends, more touchy than about themselves."

"But," said Arthur, sitting down on the sofa again, and relapsing into his lover's whisper, "they are not you; you are yourself, my own Nancy, my flower among weeds—there is nobody like you; don't you know that I think so? Then don't expect me to put them, or anyone, on the same level with you."

Nancy held back and grumbled still, shutting her ear against these sweet

words. But Sarah Jane had retired from the field, and her mother made secret signs to her, deprecating her folly. Why should she "go on" like that, and worry Arthur? Thus after awhile the commotion subsided. Durant was gone safely out of the place, and it was within about ten days only of the wedding. This must certainly be the last of the storms, though it was by no means the first. The house was too small to overflow with millinery, as most houses do at such a moment, and the Bates' were not rich enough to fit out the bride extensively; but yet they were doing what they could for her. Though she had only white muslin for her wedding-dress, her mother had gone up to Shoolbred's to buy Nancy a "silk" for best, which, except her aunt's old ones, was the first "silk" she had ever had. And everything was progressing. Arthur, if he could have managed it, would have had a kind of runaway wedding, but the Bates' were respectable, and would not

hear of such a thing. All was to be done decently and in order, however he might feel. It was the first wedding in the family, and they meant to do justice to it. But when Arthur went back to his room in Mr. Eagles' commodious house that evening, his heart was heavier than it became the heart of a bridegroom to be. Up to this time he had been able to turn off with a laugh the incongruities of his position; even they seemed to give piquancy to his happiness, and to the perfections of the beautiful bride whom he had found in so humble a place. Who could think of the place when they saw her? And Nancy in reality was full of variety and charm, and the courtship had been amusing as well as entrancing, devoid of all that monotony which is the usual curse of successful love. But Durant's visit had given a great shock to the young man, and oddly enough the whole force of that shock only came upon him when Sarah Jane made her little speech imply-

ing an interest on her part in Durant. Sarah Jane! the idea was so preposterous, so unnatural, that he laughed in spite of himself, and then grew hot, and red, and angry.

This attempt to repeat his own love-history, with Durant for the hero and Sarah Jane for the heroine, seemed to throw ridicule and debasement upon the little romance of which, up to this moment, he had been almost proud. It seemed to place Sarah Jane on the same level with her sister, a suggestion which fired him to fury. For there was just so much truth in it as made the suggestion intolerable. To the eyes of the world, perhaps, even to his mother and sister, there might seem no difference between Nancy and Sarah Jane; and he himself might seem to others to make as ridiculous a figure as he would feel Durant to make had he fallen a victim to the other girl's attractions. The feeling that this was so, though he would not allow it in words, haunted him,

as it were, underground, in the bottom of his heart, and made him more angry than anything had yet done. He would not allow it to be put into words even within his mind, but it had flashed across him, and could not now be annihilated; he himself must appear to others as contemptible, as idiotical as he would have felt Durant to be had he wanted to marry Sarah Jane. And this idea brought all his native world before him, his mother and sister, who, no doubt, by this time had heard Durant's account, and were talking it over, as women do, going over and over it, and coming back to it again and again. He could see them in the large rooms of the house in town, where they had come hastily from the country on hearing all this, and where he had been summoned to meet them, though he had refused to go. How different those rooms were from Mrs. Bates' parlour! It would have been strange indeed if the contrast had not struck him. He saw in imagination the two anxious

faces close to each other in the wider horizon of their life and surroundings, the spacious quiet, the order and refinement which he had grown almost out of acquaintance with. What story would Durant tell, what account would he give? Would he place Nancy on a level with the others of her family, or was he sufficiently clever to perceive the vast difference between them? Arthur could not tell. If Durant had, indeed, walked and talked voluntarily with Sarah Jane, was it possible that he could perceive the infinite superiority of Nancy? His lip curled with the true stage sneer. He was ready to have laughed the "Ha, ha!" the bitter laugh of conventional ridicule and despair. It was long now since he had paid any attention to the reading which was his supposed object, and he rushed hastily upstairs to his room when he entered the house of Mr. Eagles. It was a large, handsome, old-fashioned house. He went upstairs, glad that all the doors were closed, and that there was

nobody to meet him on the stairs to ask him unpleasant questions. Mr. Eagles had said something to him on the day before which had offended Arthur, but which he had been half inclined to laugh at; but he did not laugh now. Out of his own half-amusement with the circumstances of his wooing, he had come suddenly, through Durant, to have an angry and wounded consciousness of how it would appear to the world. Even the Eagles', what must they think? Arthur resolved hastily not to continue here, to separate himself at least from criticism. Certainly Durant, thus far, had done him nothing but harm. He had opened his eyes, as the eyes of Adam were opened in the garden, and a hot, resentful shame, not of his Nancy or his projected marriage, but of the wrong and ridiculous ideas people might entertain about them, had risen up in his mind. Nothing could have been a worse preparation for the visit which Mr. Eagles himself was coming

upstairs to make him. Mr. Eagles felt that he had already delayed much too long, and put himself in the wrong by his non-interference; but Durant's visit had broken the ice for him, and he had made up his mind to delay no longer. Arthur had scarcely lighted his candles and thrown himself into his easy-chair by the fire, when the master of the house knocked at his door.

"Mr. Eagles!" he cried, with angry consternation, as he saw him.

Of course, he knew what was coming. He cast a quick, instinctive glance at a portmanteau which was in a corner. He would pack it up at once, and be gone.

"I have seen nothing of you, Curtis, for some weeks," said Mr. Eagles, abruptly. "I have been remiss in seeing you on the subject. Men come here, you are aware, to read, not for other pursuits; but you have not been reading."

"No; you have reason to find fault,"

said Arthur, with candour. "I acknowledge it. And the fact is, I am on the eve of going away. I, too, ought to have seen you about it before, but I have been occupied."

"Evidently—and how occupied?" said the little man, sternly. "I have nothing to do with your morals, Mr. Curtis. I didn't undertake to look after your conduct."

"Conduct—morals!" cried the young man.

"Yes, Sir!" said the "coach," in a voice of thunder, "conduct and morals. Do you think it shows either morals or conduct to shirk entirely the object for which you were received under my roof, and to give all your attention to a love affair—an intrigue?"

"How dare you use such a word?" cried Arthur; but the effect of his indignation was spoiled by the fact that his opponent was too voluble and energetic to give him his turn in speaking, or

anything more than just a momentary opportunity to insert, edgeways, half a word.

"This is not what you came here for," said Mr. Eagles. "Your father has a right to turn upon me, and ask me what I mean by it; and all the fathers of all the men have a right to drag me over the coals for countenancing such misconduct. Parents are intolerable, but here they might have some reason. I have done wrong in letting you remain under my roof."

"That is easily managed," cried Arthur, with a rush, seizing upon the portmanteau. "You shall very soon be relieved of my presence."

"I mean to be," said Mr. Eagles. "You ought to have gone long since. You ought never to have been here at all. Oh," he said, with provoking composure, as Arthur began in fury to empty his drawers bodily into the portmanteau, "it is not necessary to clear out to-night.

Nothing can happen before to-morrow. I don't want to be unreasonable. You can stay for to-night."

"Not another hour!" cried Arthur in his excitement, and he violently pulled out one drawer after another.

Mr. Eagles stood for a moment and watched him with a saturnine smile. At last he resumed.

"You had better go in comfort when you go; there is no such hurry all at once. To-morrow will do. Does your father, may I ask, know how your time has been occupied here?"

"Perhaps you have told him," said Arthur, looking up from his hurried packing.

"No, Sir; I have not told him. I have nothing to do with it. I expressly said that I was not responsible for conduct; but he ought to have been informed all the same. I hope somebody has done it. If it were my business, if I had ever gone in for that sort of thing, I should

have done it. I take no credit for being silent. It was no business of mine that you were making a fool of yourself. But on second thoughts, I think I have made a mistake. It was my business, more or less. The men ought not to have been subjected to such an example."

"Mr. Eagles," cried Arthur, furious, "do you mean me to toss you out of window, or throw you downstairs?"

"You are welcome to try," said the little man, standing firm as a rock, with his legs wide apart; "perfectly welcome to try. I am out of training, it is true, but I am not afraid of you, and I mean that you should hear the truth for once before you leave my house. Your conduct, Sir, has been that of a fool—not a wicked fool, I am glad to say. If you had been deceiving that girl, it is I who would have kicked you downstairs, training or not; but though you're honourable, you're a fool, Sir; you're sacrificing your life; for what?—for a delusion. No man of

your position ever got on comfortably with a girl of hers, uneducated, uncultivated—"

"Have you nearly done?" asked Arthur, white with rage, and scarcely able to restrain himself.

"I have done altogether," said Mr. Eagles. "You have my opinion, and that is all that is necessary. The house is shut up for the night. Don't show yourself twice a fool by rushing out at this hour. Go to bed and quiet your heated brains, and go to-morrow. You are a fool, as I say, but you are not dishonourable, and I hope your idiocy may turn out better than it deserves to do. Good night."

CHAPTER IX.

ON the evening of the same day Durant told his tale to Lady Curtis. She and her daughter had come to London on hearing the news of Arthur's "entanglement," as many an alarmed mother and sister have done before them. Sir John either could not, or would not join them. He had less faith than women have in the efficacy of personal remonstrances, and indeed he had no great faith in the delinquency to start with, and gave his son credit for "more sense," if less virtue, than they believed him capable of. To hear that Arthur was on the eve of marriage had stunned Sir John.

He had written with indignant vehemence, and he had commissioned his "man of business" to go and see the "young fool;" and he had forbidden his wife to go to her son as she desired. "Get him to come to you if you can," he had said; but he was afraid for the results of a visit from his wife with the possibility of an introduction of the girl, and a melting of my lady's heart over her son's love. Sir John gave his wife credit for much more sentiment than she possessed; and as for Lucy, she of course was sentimental enough to be sympathetic at once without any preliminaries. "You had better leave him to the lawyers," Sir John said, having a strong confidence in people who could make themselves disagreeable; but he consented that the ladies should go to town to be near the spot, if the other functionaries managed to "unearth" the culprit. Once away from that temptation, once delivered from the syren who had "entangled" him, no doubt Arthur

would be safer with his mother and sister than anywhere else. And Lady Curtis had acquiesced, though with reluctance, in this prohibition. She had felt that to go and see him might bring her into painful collision with the other people about him, and at the best would expose Arthur to what a young man likes least, the shame of being interfered with, and worried by his family in full sight of the world. Sir John, however, had nothing to do with the mission of Durant; *he* was the emissary of the ladies called by them to their aid in the emergency. No other messenger had seemed to them so suitable. His dearest friend, his *ami de l'enfance*, what more natural than that they should have recourse to his aid? And in these circumstances it may be supposed how hard it was for Durant to tell the story of his own defeat. He did it in the library in Berkeley Square in the waning afternoon, just before the evening fell. The room itself which seemed to him half as big as the whole

town of Underhayes, was full of ghostly books, showing here and there in a streak of gilding, in a bit of white vellum, which caught the remains of the red October sunshine. The thinned trees waved slowly across the windows, and when a gust of wind came, a shower of falling leaves swept over the firmament outside. Lady Curtis sat between the fire and the nearest window, listening intently with her eyes fixed on his face. Lucy was in one of the window-seats, almost behind their visitor. She could not watch his face openly as her mother did; but she was not less anxious than her mother. When he turned round to her, as he did often, she shrank a little further back, preferring to watch him unobserved; for to Lucy, as to many other women, it seemed that half the story was told by the countenance of the teller. Lady Curtis had been a beautiful woman in her day, and had the beauty of her age now, as perfect an example of forty-five as could be desired. She was ample in form,

but her head and face had retained all their delicacy and refinement; and if there was a slight hollow in the cheek, and a slight fulness about the throat, neither was sufficient to tell against her; and modified by youth, and by a somewhat softer disposition, Lucy's face was as her mother's. They were neither of them brilliant in colour. Lady Curtis had acquired something in this way with the matronly increase of her figure; but Lucy had no more than the rose tint which health gives, and her hair was soft light brown, a shade or two lighter than her eyes, hair which in her mother's case was so daintily sprinkled with grey as to appear only lighter in tint than it had once been. Whoever desired to see Lady Curtis as she was at twenty had but to look at her daughter, and whoever wanted to make sure what Lucy would look like a quarter of a century hence could see it in Lady Curtis's face. It gives an additional charm to both when this resem-

blance is carried out as it was in these two. It makes both youth and age more fair, bringing them together in a tender half mist of illusion, one face in two representations; the mother and the child both profited by it; Lady Curtis showing at her best in her darling's brown eyes, and disclosing in her own how little there was to alarm the warmest admirer in that darling's future. And they were proud of their resemblance, a little for the beauty's sake, perhaps, but a great deal more for the love's. Durant felt all around him a subtle air of witchery between the mother and the daughter. The very atmosphere was Lucy, sweet, soft, yet penetrating. And the two ladies seemed to look at each other through him as if he had been made of glass, and knew his inmost heart.

At present they were much cast down by what he said. He had described to them the Bates household, the little stuffy parlour, the rum and water, and

Sarah Jane; and worst of all Arthur's determined adherence to his love, and his promise. It seemed incredible to them that their son and brother should be satisfied in such a place. Some occult influence, something uncanny, seemed to be in the "infatuation" altogether. "And, Mr. Durant, do you really think nothing, *nothing* will make him give it up?"

"Indeed I do think so," said Durant, "I cannot say otherwise, and I am sure you would not wish to hear anything less than the truth. He is—very much attached—to her."

"And she—is just like the others," said Lady Curtis faintly, "a little better you said, not so vulgar? Heaven help us! that I should speak so of my son's—no, Mr. Durant, not yet, I *cannot* call her my son's bride. Something may come in the way, something must be thought of—"

"I don't think you will find anything. I have used every argument;—and to

tell the truth I do not know that I am quite sure, in my own mind—of course I did not say this to Arthur—I am not quite convinced in my own thoughts—"

"Of what, Mr. Durant?" Lady Curtis said this anxiously in front of him, and Lucy breathed it half under her breath behind. He looked at the mother, but turned his chair a little so as to come nearer the daughter, who eluded him, gliding still a little further back.

"Well," he said, "you may not be pleased, but I must speak according to my conscience. I would give a year of my life to get Arthur free, you know that—"

"What are you going to tell us?" cried Lady Curtis, clasping her white hands. Lucy did not say anything, but leant forward, so intent that when he again turned to her, she did not as usual withdraw.

"It is just this," he said, sinking his voice; and the evening air seemed to make a visible droop towards the darkening to

increase the alarming effect: "I will not on my honour say any more to Arthur on the subject. He is a gentleman; I cannot even to save him from misery bid him break his word."

"Good God!" cried Lady Curtis, starting to her feet, and her excitement was so strong that the exclamation may be forgiven her. "His word! when his whole career and happiness are at stake—to a creature like that!"

"I knew that was what you were going to say," came to him, in a sigh, from the dim light in the window, against which, herself a shadow, Lucy was. And this, though there was no word of encouragement in it, gave Durant strength.

"I understand your feeling," he said, addressing her mother "I thought the same when I went there; but Lady Curtis—"

"Don't speak to me, don't speak to me!" she cried, "they have entrapped you too; you have encouraged him in his folly; —his word!"

ked up and down the room in a fit of impatience, her hands clasped, and inarticulate moans came from her unawares. The firelight seemed to get stronger and warmer as the daylight waned, and it was against this glow that they saw her figure in her excitement. They—for Lucy kept still in the window putting up her hand furtively to dry her eyes, not joining herself to her mother. She had put herself silently, he felt it, on his side. In another minute Lady Curtis sat down again, dropping impatiently into her chair. "Well!" she said almost harshly, "how about his word?"

"Do not be angry with me," said Durant quite humbly. He could afford to be humble with Lucy backing him up. "I have not betrayed to him this feeling, which—if it is fantastic I cannot help it." Here Lucy made a slight movement which seemed to him to imply a "no, no," "I have acted against it. It was not in my mind at first. But if you will con-

sider the circumstances—There is nothing which can be called entrapping. Nothing has been done to deceive him, all the reverse; and he has engaged himself to this girl voluntarily, made every kind of promise to her. Can I bid him withdraw now, perjure himself, deceive her?"

"Tut! tut!" said Lady Curtis, "don't deceive yourself with big words; all this solemnity is unnecessary. They are not accustomed to it in that class of society; a little arrangement with the family, an offer of so much—Do you really think more would be wanted? Mr. Durant, you are too romantic. How I wish I had gone myself!"

"You would have done no good had you gone yourself. Even if you could have persuaded the family, there is Arthur to deal with—and her—He loves her, Lady Curtis, there is no sham on Arthur's part."

"Fiddlesticks!" she cried, rising again in restless excitement. "Arthur, a boy, a light-hearted creature that would mend

of any heartbreak in a week; and she—of course I don't know her—but there is nothing so good for wounded feelings, or so healing, as banknotes."

"Mamma!" said Lucy, holding out her hands with a mute entreaty; and then she added, "If you offered them money, what would Arthur say?"

"Oh, what would Arthur say? and what would Arthur do? and is he not bound to keep his word?" cried Lady Curtis. "How you worry me with your sentimentalizing! What should have been done was to bring him away, to hush it up. And it might have been done; but Mr. Durant has spoiled it all; he might have done it. Nobody has so much power with Arthur. If he had only brought him away for a single day all might have been well."

"He would not have come," said Durant, more to himself than to her, for he was vexed and angry, though he was most anxious not to show it. "I—power with

him! He quarrelled with me outright, would not speak to me. I tried what I could. The family might have yielded, but she would not yield—not an inch. She told me—when I threatened that Sir John and you would withdraw or diminish his allowance, and that he might become poor—that there was all the more reason why she should hold by him—it would prove her sincerity."

"I should have said the same thing," said Lucy, holding her breath.

"You! you have been brought up very differently. So, she was disinterested, was she? Ah!" said Lady Curtis, calming a little, "that is more dangerous than I thought."

"Yes," said Durant, pleased to have produced some effect, and carried beyond the bounds of prudence, "that is exactly what she said. It was her only chance to show that it was of himself she was thinking, not any wish to be rich or to become my lady."

"To become my lady!" My Lady faltered as if a blow had been struck at her. Yes, to be sure, her son would be Sir Arthur in his turn, and his wife Lady Curtis, everybody knew that; but to feel that your end is anticipated, and your very name appropriated, this gives even to the old, much more to the middle-aged, a curious thrill of sensation. It was a shock to her. She felt as if she had been struck; then she recovered herself and laughed a little, short, hard laugh. "So," she said, rubbing her hands feebly together, "she is looking forward to that. I did not think of that."

Durant saw his mistake, but he did not see how to to mend it. Lucy, darting upon him in the darkness what he felt to be a glance of reproach, rushed hastily past him to her mother. But by this time Lady Curtis had recovered herself.

"Never mind," she said, "never mind, my dear. It was quite natural. But that

was not Arthur. No, we know him better than to believe that."

"And she does not know you—did not know what she was saying."

"Oh, as for that! Ring the bell, Lucy. Let us have the lamp at least, if we can have no other light on the subject. It was just the thing, of course, that an ignorant under-bred girl would think of."

"But, mamma! Yes, it was her ignorance; and she said—that was what you were telling us, Mr. Durant? that she would be glad to think there was no chance of this now?"

"Lucy," said her mother, taking no notice of Durant, "the one thing that could vex me most in this would be that you, out of perverse youthful generosity, should take up the part of champion to this girl. Yes, you are beginning, I have noticed it. But I cannot bear this, it is the only thing wanting to fill up my cup."

"I will not, mother dear. I will do

nothing to vex you. You shall not have to struggle with me too. Has there ever been a time when we have not been in sympathy? But still we must be just," said Lucy, with her arm round her mother's waist. She said the last words almost in a whisper. They stood clinging together, relieved against the warm light from the fire. All the rest of the room had fallen into darkness, the windows but so many stripes of a pale glimmer, no real light coming from them, all gloom about, only this glow of warmth showing the two who held together. Durant had nothing to do with that warmth and union. He sat behind in the dark, neither taking any notice of him. And in his heart there was a certain bitterness. He had left his own concerns at their appeal. He had taken a great deal of trouble, and this was all the acknowledgment. He felt very sore and wounded in his heart.

Then lights were brought into the room, lamps which made two partial circles of

illumination; and the presence of the servant who brought them, necessitated a few words on ordinary subjects. Lady Curtis resumed her seat with that anxious hypocrisy by which we show our respect for the curious world below stairs, and asked Mr. Durant if he meant to remain in town, or if he was going back to the country. And he told her, not without meaning, that having come to town, though a little earlier than he intended, he meant to stay. There was a pause when they were alone again, and then Durant rose to go away.

"I am afraid I have not succeeded in doing what you expected of me," he said, somewhat drearily. "I did the best I could, and if you like I will go again, though I shall get but a poor reception. I am unfortunate," he added, with a faint smile, which had its meaning too.

"Mamma," said Lucy, "you are not going to let Mr. Durant go, thinking we are ungrateful to him! That can never

be—when he has taken so much trouble."

"Trouble when one has failed does not count for much," he said, smiling. "It is unkind to talk to me of being grateful or ungrateful; am I not as much, I mean almost as much, very nearly as much, interested in Arthur as yourselves? as if he were my brother," he said with vehemence. "He has been so; I can never think of him otherwise whatever happens."

"And whatever happens you will always think of him so?" cried Lucy, for the moment forgetting her reserve. "Oh promise me, Mr. Durant! Even if this makes a difference to us, it will make none to you? If he is so wrong, if he is so foolish that we have to turn from him, you will not? It will make no change to you?"

"None!" he said, fervently. "None! I will stand by him whatever happens. You may trust me—especially now."

Lucy knew that he meant especially since she had asked him, and got a sudden soft suffusion of colour which tinted her to her very hair; but Lady Curtis thought he meant, and how justly! especially now when there was need of every friendship to stand by her son. She answered him with a struggle between the gratitude which she ought to feel, and the annoyed disappointment and distress that filled her heart.

"We have no right to ask such a pledge from you, Mr. Durant. Yes, you have always been very kind, very kind. Forgive me," she said, softening, "if I am too unhappy to say what I ought. I thought something might have been done. But to think that we must stand by calmly and see him accomplish his own destruction! Oh, think again!" she cried, with sudden tears, "can we do nothing, nothing more, to save my boy from this miserable fate?"

Durant put down his hat. He did not go till late, nearly midnight. They sat and talked of Arthur, nothing but Arthur, the whole evening through.

CHAPTER X.

THAT which Lady Curtis had reproached Durant for not doing was done by the lawyers so successfully that Arthur Curtis was driven almost frantic, and swore wild oaths of vengeance upon his family. Sir John's ambassador was not held back by any delicacy. He offered a sum which made Mrs. Bates tremble, and moved her husband to declare, with emphasis, that they had never thought of going against Sir John—that, of course, they wouldn't go against Sir John. Mr. Bates had a reverence for the upper classes which was almost sublime. He made no radical revolutionary demand of

excellence from them—he did not even require that they should benefit, or be especially civil to himself. Anyhow, and under any circumstances, he was willing to give himself up to be trodden under the feet of any Sir John, if need was; and that he should oppose one, after his will was fully known, seemed impossible. Especially a Sir John with a bag of money in his hand.

"Let him marry our Nancy after Sir John Curtis, his excellent father, has spoke against it! You couldn't do such a thing, Sarah," he said, "and when there is a nice bit of money coming in for doing what is only our dooty—"

"Our duty is first to Nancy," said Mrs. Bates doubtfully, "and if we were to say it shouldn't be, who can tell if she'd obey us? Nancy has a spirit of her own."

That this was true they both had good occasion to know. But it was a great temptation. The lawyer gave them

to understand that if Nancy could be withdrawn from the field, and Arthur allowed to go free—(this was how they all put it, making believe that Arthur was a kind of caged bird, to be let loose, or kept in a cage at will)—a thousand pounds might be forthcoming. A thousand pounds! never before in all their lives had such a sum been dangled before the eyes of this pair. There seemed so many things that they could do with it. It would portion off, they thought, all the children. With two hundred a piece, Matilda and Sarah Jane would be heiresses, and Charley might have a little more to start him in business; and a sum left in the bank for a rainy day. What a heavenly prospect it was! "Was there any sweetheart in the world," the tax-collector asked, "that was worth it?" and Mrs. Bates shook her head emphatically and said, "No—certainly not!" But then would Nancy see that? Girls had their own ways of thinking; and on

the other side was her sweetheart, and the marriage that was all settled, that everybody knew of— Mrs. Bates felt that even to herself this would be a bitter pill—to countermand all the preparations for the wedding, and give all the neighbours a right to say that the Bates' had overreached themselves, and pride was having a fall. This, no doubt, would be a tremendous price to pay; but, a thousand pounds! They talked it over until it seemed to them both that not to have this thousand pounds would be at once a deception and a wrong. The Lord knew it was not for themselves they wanted it. But Mr. Bates was more and more strongly of opinion that to prefer a sweetheart to this sum of money, that would be the making of the family, was something beyond mortal perversity. He was for sending her away at once to a brother of his who lived in Wapping, without leaving her time to communicate with Arthur.

"But you must lock her up when she gets to Wapping," said Mrs. Bates regretfully, "or she'd write to him straight off to let him know where she was—and where would be the gain?"

"Well, Sally, we'd have had nothing to do with it, you know," said Mr. Bates, not liking to put the suggestion into words—but yet feeling that if the thousand pounds was paid, and circumstances happened after, over which they had no control—why, they could have no control over circumstances—and nobody would ask them to give back the money. Mr. Bates' wits had been sharpened by his tax-collecting, but his wife was not so clever.

"If we take the money, we'll have to do the work," she said, "and it's all very well to talk, but who'll manage Nancy? That girl do scare me."

"Fudge! you can manage her if you like. What girl can stand out again her mother?" said Bates.

"It is a deal you know," said his wife

with mingled grandeur and scorn; "but I'll sound Nancy. I think sometimes that she's a bit tired of him. He's a gentleman, and has nice ways; but he's not so desperate in earnest like as John Raisins is after Sarah Jane."

"Ah! that's the kind of husband to get for your girls. A steady young fellow doing a good business, with a nice shop and a nice house. That's the man for my money," said Mr. Bates.

"That shows again just what a deal you know," said she, "Sarah Jane would rather have had Mr. Durant, that lawyer fellow, if he had offered, than half a dozen of Johnny Raisins. That's how it is with girls. A gentleman! that's all their cry. And I won't say but I like 'em best myself," Mrs. Bates said after a pause. "They have a different way with them; but these are things that women take more notice of than men."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the tax-collector, piqued by the suggestion.

"You know, William," said Mrs. Bates solemnly, "that if it hadn't been for your genteel ways, and what you may call a genteel business, not like a shop, or that sort of thing, that I'd never have married you."

"Oh, I like that!" he said. But he was on the whole pleased to think his occupation still struck his wife as a genteel business. "I've got to give an answer to the gentleman to-morrow, Sally. There's not much time to lose."

"I'll sound Nancy," said Mrs. Bates, but she shook her head.

"Sound her! I'd pack her off to Sam," said the father; but that only showed how little he knew.

And Nancy, as Mrs. Bates divined, on being sounded, was furious. She had no words to express her indignation. She rushed out in hot haste to find Arthur, and denounce his family to him. He had left Mr. Eagles, and was living in lodgings on the Green, and there Nancy flew in

hot haste, tapping at his window, which was on the ground floor, and calling him forth. She would have gone in, but it had been evident to her that this was not the kind of thing that pleased Arthur. She burst forth into a furious assault upon his family the moment he joined her.

"If it was not just giving in to them, I'd never see you more," she said, "that is what you call gentlefolks—to come undermining, offering money, insulting folks that are a deal better than themselves!"

"Trying to ruin my happiness," said Arthur, with flashing eyes; "that is not the thing you seem to think of.'

"How can I, when it's me that's insulted?" cried the girl. "Oh! I'd like to give them a bit of my mind. I'd just like to tell my lady what a girl like me thinks of her. I'd like to tell her that, just to spite her. Just to show how I

despise her, I'd marry you if you hadn't a penny."

"Nancy, my mother has nothing to do with this," said Arthur, to whom, as was natural enough, this form of moral obligation was not the most delightful. "I don't mean to say that you have not a perfect right to be indignant. But it is not my mother that is to blame."

"Oh, yes, so you think," cried the girl; "but it's always women that do the worst things. I'm not afraid of men. They may stab you bold to your face, but they don't do this sort of sneaking, cruel thing. I'd give anything I've got in the world just for one half-hour with my lady, her and me."

"My mother has nothing to do with it," repeated Arthur; but though he was convinced on this point, his mother, who had nothing to do with it, suddenly appeared to him as an enemy; and he, too, felt a hot resentment against her in his heart. And when he had taken Nancy

home, which he did somewhat against her will, for she did not think his escort at all necessary; he rushed to Mr. Rolt, the lawyer, and poured such floods of wrath upon him that the veteran almost quailed. He wrote to Sir John that evening that Arthur was quite impracticable, and that "affairs must take their course." "If I had known earlier, something might have been done, for the parents did not seem unwilling to compromise," he wrote, which made Sir John, in his turn, curse the old formalist.

"If I had but gone myself!" he said.

Lady Curtis was completely innocent of this mission; perhaps she would not have disapproved of it, but certainly she herself would have gone more delicately to work. She was informed of it by a furious letter from Arthur, which cost her many tears.

"If it is your doing, mother, if you have thus insulted the girl who ought to

be like your own daughter, then I can only say that you have lost your son," he wrote; and the two ladies in Berkeley Square shed tears of anguish and indignation over this cruel letter.

"This is likely to endear the girl to me, is it not?" said Lady Curtis, when she could speak.

"Oh, he does not mean it, he cannot mean it!" cried Lucy, with sobs in her voice.

"No," said the mother, unconsciously taking up Nancy's argument, with that curious contempt of the men involved in such a quarrel which is so strangely characteristic of women; "no, it is not him, it is her; and this is the influence my boy, my only boy, is to be under all his life!"

What could Lucy say? There was nothing further to be said or done.

And it may be supposed that as the day approached, and they knew that he who had been the object of deepest concern

and affection to both, the son who had been his mother's favourite, the brother whom his sister had looked up to and regarded with a semi-worship so long as he would let her, was about to go through the most important act of his life without their presence or sympathy—excitement ran very high in the veins of the two ladies. Sir John called them home by every post, having in his mind a secret dread that they might do something or say something to compromise him, or at least themselves, in respect to Arthur; and Lady Curtis, without ever saying why, made excuses to remain, now a week, now a day longer. She did not even tell herself why; she would not allow the thought to form itself, that, perhaps, even at the last moment, Arthur might appear, at least to ask her forgiveness and blessing, if not to tell her that he had repented and abandoned this evil way. She stayed in Berkeley Square, trembling every time there was a knock at the door,

gazing wistfully from the window at passing cabs and carriages. When Durant came in a Hansom, one wintry evening, he was received with open arms at the door; and the disappointment and impatience in Lady Curtis's face at the sight of him, was very far from flattering.

"Oh!" she cried, "I thought it was—" and burst into tears.

When Lucy tried to say that he could not come now, that to desert his bride now would be unmanly and treacherous, her mother turned upon her with a dumb rage which was terrible to see. She hoped till the very eve of the marriage—the time fixed for which Durant had informed them of. And that evening Lucy made a prayer, which her mother was deeply angered by at first, but finally yielded to. Lucy begged, with tears, to be allowed to go and witness her brother's marriage, from a distance, at least. She promised to do nothing and say nothing which would betray her; to

keep her veil down, not to speak to him, not to give him any token of her presence. All this Lucy promised, and at last she carried her point. They spent a miserable evening together, Durant coming in late to bring them the last news. He had found out the hour, and all about the wedding arrangements, and he was too happy to put himself at Lucy's service to escort her to Underhayes. Lady Curtis' old maid, who had known Arthur all his life, and who could not be kept from knowing all the family affairs, was to go with them; and Durant pledged himself to meet them at the railway, and take care of them, and see that they were protected from any contact with the family of Arthur's bride. In the prospect of this, Durant was, perhaps, not so downcast about Arthur's unhappy marriage as he ought to have been, and Lady Curtis surprised sundry signs of unseemly satisfaction in him.

"I do not think Mr. Durant is nearly

so true a friend to my poor boy as I should have expected," she said, with a suspicious cloud on her face, when he went away.

"Oh, mamma, I am sure he is very fond of Arthur," said Lucy. She too had seen, perhaps, the glimpses of satisfaction which burst through his gravity; but then Lucy, better informed than her mother, set them down to the right cause.

"He may be fond of Arthur, but he does not see as we do that this is destruction to him," said Lady Curtis, putting her handkerchief to her wet eyes.

"I am sure he will be his warm friend in any trouble."

"Well, my dear, let us hope so; for he will want all his friends. I think so myself," said Lady Curtis. "In any trouble! What do you call this but trouble? If he had lost everything he had in the world, it would not be half so bad; but men have such strange ways of

looking at things. If he were to break his leg or get a bad illness, which would not be half so serious——"

"Oh, mamma!" cried Lucy, putting out two fingers of her pretty hand to avert the evil omen.

"Well, well, you know that is not what I mean. God forbid my boy should be ill, away from home, among strangers!" cried Lady Curtis. "It would be strange if you had to *faire les cornes* for anything his mother said; but what would illness be in comparison with this? In that case, Mr. Durant would be perfect, I feel sure of it; but now——"

"I think he was pleased to see how your heart melted to poor Arthur, and to know of this," said Lucy, pointing to a letter which lay on the table. Was it for her to say that there was still something else which made Durant still more glad?

"Oh, Lucy! as if my heart required to be melted towards my son, my only boy!"

And then you may be sure Lucy cried; what could a girl do?

It can scarcely be said that these preparatory days were much more cheerful to Arthur. Everybody had dropped away from him. He had the prospect in a few days of what people are pleased to call happiness. He was to marry the bride of his choice, and to take her away with him, the two by themselves, the Elysium of the primitive imagination; and Arthur was very much in love. He believed that as soon as they got away, when he had once separated this rose of his from all the domestic thorns surrounding her, he would be perfectly happy. It was the one redeeming point in the difficulties of the moment that he entirely believed this. Then, at least, he thought he was sure of blessedness; and that prospect made much possible that would not have been possible otherwise. But to be cut off from all companionship of his own class, even from Mr. Eagles, and the "men"

who frequented Mr. Eagles' intellectual workshops; to be separated from his family whom he loved, though he was angry with them, to have nothing to do, though on ordinary occasions he was not disposed to do very much—this isolation was very hard upon Arthur. He had no society but that of the Bates' household, and was often left to amuse himself as he could in the stuffy parlour, without even Nancy, who had naturally a great many things to do on the eve of her wedding, which brides in rich households are not called upon to think of. Arthur winced when he had to endure the companionship of the tax-collector or his son Charley, unsweetened by Nancy's presence; and it must be allowed that as the time approached which was to bind him for ever to the family, his toleration of them, which during his courtship had been unbounded, began to give way. It began to be very hard to put up with Mr. Bates' rum-and-water, and the

railleries of Sarah Jane; and Matilda and Mrs. Bates, both of whom were "sensible," began to perceive this—the mother with resentment, the daughter with a certain sympathy. Matilda intimated to her mother that "it was touch and go with Arthur," and that she "wasn't surprised;" but the father and son and Sarah Jane remained happily unaware that they were not the best of company for Nancy's future husband, whom they called freely by his Christian name, making him "quite at home." This gave him an eagerness to push on the wedding, which was quite the proper thing in the circumstances. He would have had it a week earlier if he could have persuaded them to depart from any of the grandeur they intended, and as it was, he chafed and grumbled at the delay in a way, which as Mrs. Bates remarked, was "most flattering" for them all. But poor Arthur had no intention of flattering. He could do nothing but sit in his lodgings, or in the Bates' par-

lour, and watch the progress of the hours. After the wedding he vowed to himself he would change all that; there would be an entire revolution in his life; he would escape with his Nancy into a better and fresher air, and when they asked about the return of the pair, he did his best to evade the question.

"I don't think we must bind ourselves to anything, Mrs. Bates. If Nancy likes Paris we may stay there—or if we can get as far as Italy——"

"Oh, I shan't stay very long, mamma," said Nancy, "I daresay I shall soon get tired among foreigners."

"Shouldn't I like to see you," cried Mrs. Bates, "you that know the language! What a good thing it is you that is going, and not Matilda or Sarah Jane."

"Oh I should soon have got on," said the latter personage. "I should soon have picked it up, *commeng vous portez vous;* I know a little already."

"But not like Nancy, who had French

for five quarters at Miss Woodroof's, when your poor dear aunt was alive. My sister was one that thought a great deal of education—"

"I wish you would not all talk together," said Nancy, whose temper was not improved by her important position. "I hated it. I never learned a word I could help. I'll let Arthur do all the talking; and as soon as ever we can, you'll see us home."

"On the contrary," said Arthur, with secret uneasiness, "you will like Paris so well that you will never wish to leave it. It is so gay and bright; and if we can go on as far as Italy—that is what I should like most."

"Anyhow, you will be back before Christmas?"

"Oh, Christmas! long before that!" said Nancy.

Arthur said nothing; but he recorded a vow in the depths of his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

DURANT met Lucy at the station on the morning of Arthur's wedding day. She was under the charge of old Mrs. Davies, the confidential woman who had nursed Lady Curtis's children through their sicknesses, and petted them at all times and seasons since ever they were born. Lucy was very pale, but her distress was nothing to that of old Davies, who seemed to think it her duty to cry all the way, and heaved from time to time the bitterest sighs. "Oh, my dear young gentleman," she said at intervals, "Oh, Master Arthur! to think as I should have lived to see such a day!" This

did not improve Lucy's spirits, who sat very pale in a corner, sometimes piteously lifting her eyes to Durant for sympathy. The day chosen for Arthur's marriage was the 1st of November, as inappropriate a moment for a wedding as could well be imagined, All Saints' day, the anniversary of death, not of bridal, and a gloomy morning, with a soft persistent drizzle of rain, and skies that looked like lead. "I hope the sun will shine a little," said Lucy."

"Oh, Miss Lucy," said old Davies, "why should the sun shine? They can't expect no happiness, flying in the face of their parents like this."

Durant who was not by a long way so melancholy as he ought to have been, did what he could to make the party more cheerful. How could he be otherwise than happy with Lucy seated opposite to him, travelling with him, with an air of belonging to him, which filled the young man's veins as with wine? Sometimes he

almost could have believed that it was his own wedding day, not Arthur's, and that something more than his most foolish hopes had been realized. Alas, on the contrary, did not Arthur's wedding make his own more hopeless than ever? Would the parents ever consent to a second unsatisfactory alliance; and what could a poor young barrister, grandson of a fortunate saddler, with the saddler's blood in his veins but none of his money in his pockets, be but a very unsatisfactory match for Sir John Curtis's daughter? This thought did more than friendship to restore him to the state of mind becoming the occasion, and in harmony with his companions' mood; but yet by moments he forgot it, and half believed himself to be carrying Lucy off to Italy, as Arthur was about to carry his wife away from these dreary skies. How much happier he would have been than Arthur! as much happier as Lucy Curtis was more lovely, more beautiful, more desirable than the young virago Nancy

Bates. If Lucy only had been more humbly born, less well endowed! how could he wish her less fair and sweet?

He had to hold an umbrella over her as he took her to the church in which the ceremony was to take place, and he liked the rain. Old Davies, who came stumping and crying after them in a waterproof, thought it the most miserable day she ever had seen; but the young pair under the umbrella, though they were very sad (or thought they were) did not so much dislike the day. Lucy was much afraid lest she should meet the party, and yet had a yearning to be recognised by accident by her brother as well as a terror of it. She talked to Durant about this all the way, raising her pale face and those eyes which had the clearness of the skies after rain, and confiding all her feelings to him.

"If it was by accident there would be no harm; could there be any harm? I would not put myself in the way; but if it happened—"

"You could not see him to-day, could you, without also seeing *her?*"

A tear dropped hastily upon his arm, and Lucy turned her head a little away to hide that her eyes were again full. "That is the worst of all," she said, "my only brother! and I shall never again be able to see him without *her*—that is the worst of all. Oh, Mr. Durant, I don't mean anything against marriage, for I suppose people are—often—happy; but it is not happy for other people, is it? It tears one away from all that belong to one—"

How hard it was for him to answer her! "This is an exceptional case," he said, his voice trembling a little, "but we must not be infidels to the highest happiness—and love."

"Oh, love!" cried Lucy, who was thinking of her brother with all the faculties of her being, although her heart was vaguely warmed and stilled unawares by the close neighbourhood of this other who was not her brother. "Love! as if

there was but one kind. I did not think *you* would have spoken so. Do not we love him, Mr. Durant? and yet he casts us off for some one he scarcely knows."

"He will come back to you; it cannot be that the separation is for long. Arthur is not the man—"

"Oh, Mr. Durant, you mean that he will not be happy? I don't want him to be unhappy. Oh, God forbid! and why should not he be happy," said Lucy with tearful inconsistency, "if he loves her?" What could Durant say? He could think of nothing but the foolishest, most traitorous, dishonourable things, dishonourable to the trust put in him, treacherous to the confidence with which she held his arm. The very tightening of her hold, when they met other passers by on the narrow pavement, made him feel himself the basest of men, when he felt those unsayable words flutter to his lips—yet made them only flutter the more. He was glad to be able to put his companion into

a deep pew in the old fashioned church, underneath the gallery, where it would be doubly impossible for anyone to see her. Lucy pulled her cloak closely round her, and drew her veil over her face. Mrs. Davies was short, and was almost lost in the depth of the pew—and they were all very glad that the church was still encumbered with this old-fashioned lumber, and that no restorations as yet had been commenced. Durant seated himself still further back. It was a gloomy place—an old church, low-roofed and partly whitewashed. The East window looked out into a great oak, which, with its yellow leaves, was the only thing that seemed to give a little light. The dreary lines of pews seemed to add to the dismal character of the scene, the half-daylight, the rain drizzling, the old pew-opener going about in pattens —no carpet laid down for the bridal feet, or any "fuss" made. Why should any "fuss" be made about Bates the tax-collector's daughter? And no one was

disposed to do honour to Arthur, but rather the reverse, as a young man forsaking his caste, and setting the worst of examples to all other young men.

Now and then somebody would come in with a sound of closing umbrellas, and swinging of the doors, and come noisily up the aisle and drop into a pew. Girls, like Sarah Jane, in cheap hats with cheaper feathers, who sat and whispered, and laughed, and looked about them, and women of Mrs. Bates' own type, with big shawls and nondescript bonnets, came to see the Bates' triumph with no very friendly sympathy. The dreariest scene! Durant sat behind and looked at it all with his heart beating. In the general commotion in which his mind was, he too could have cried as Lucy was doing over Arthur. How different was all this from the circumstances that ought to have attended the "happiest day of his life;" would it be the happiest day of his life?—or perhaps the most miserable? And yet,

if the spectator could have taken the hand of that pale girl in front of him, and led her up to that dingy altar, how soon would he have forgotten all the circumstances! The damp-breathing place, the clammy pews, the squalor of the rain, the absence of all beauty and tokens of delight, what would they have done but make his happiness show all the brighter? Would the effect be the same with Arthur too? They had very soon an opportunity of judging; for Arthur came in suddenly by himself, looking anything but ecstatic. Fortunately, Durant thought, Lucy did not see him, her head being bent and covered with her hands. But Durant himself watched the bridegroom with feelings which he could not have described, a mixture of pity, and envy, and fellow-feeling, and contempt. That a man who was the brother of Lucy Curtis should throw away everything for Nancy Bates! and yet to have it in your power to throw away everything for love, to give the

woman you had chosen, if she were only Nancy Bates, such a proof of affection, absolute and unmixed! But Arthur scarcely seemed conscious himself of that fine position. He was very pale, with an excited look about the eyes which gave him a worn and exhausted aspect. He was feeling to the bottom of his soul the squalor, the dinginess, the damp, and the gloom. What a day it was to be married on! What a place to be married in! What dismal surroundings? old Bates and Charley, and the uncle from Wapping, and not one familiar face to look kindly at him, to wish him happiness in a voice that was dear. He sat down in the front, gazing blankly, like Durant, at the oak-tree that shed a little colour from its autumn leaves. It reminded him, by some fantastic trick of association, of the trees at home. Would he ever see that home again? The disjunction from everything he had cared for, from all he knew, came over him with a forlorn sense of

desolation and solitude—on his wedding-day! Arthur felt he was doing wrong to his bride, but how could he help it? He, too, covered his face with his hands. Durant felt that if Lucy saw him she would rush to him in indifference to all appearances, but she did not know he had passed her so quietly, all alone.

And then the few spectators began to whisper and stir, and turn their heads to the door; and a carriage was heard to stop. Lucy raised her head and put back her veil a little. She gazed breathless at the bride, who came up the aisle on her father's arm. Nancy was dressed in simple white muslin, the resources of the family having been concentrated on the "silk" in which she was to take her departure from home. But she had a veil like the most fashionable of brides, and a crown of orange-blossoms, such as would have put most brides to shame. Lucy gazed at her, more and more forgetting that she herself ought not to be seen,

and her heart swelled with a mixture of attraction and repulsion. That dress and that moment equalizes conditions. A woman cannot be more than a bride if she should be a queen. Nancy had a right to be considered as the type of all youth and womanhood, as much as if she had been the most exalted of women. Arthur was but a poor type of the other side, but for her there was no drawback, except the rain, and she had not been conscious of the rain. With her head a little drooped, but her pretty figure erect, she walked up the aisle, leaning on her shabby old father's arm, like a lily, notwithstanding the meanness of the prop. She was happy; she was serious; full of awe, which gave delicacy to her looks and movements, uncertain yet serene upon the threshold of her life. Durant, who had no prejudice, became an instant convert to her as she passed him, virginal, abstracted, a vision of whiteness and serious tender mystery. And Lucy, who was moved against her

will, could do nothing but gaze, forgetting herself, till old Davies sighed so loud and shook her head so persistently that her young mistress took fright. It was not a wedding that occupied much time. There was no music, no nuptial hymn or wedding march for Nancy Bates, and the two spectators who were most interested had scarcely recovered from their thrill of excitement when the stir about the altar told that it was all over, and the party going to the vestry to sign the register. This was the signal for the other people present to open their pew-doors, and pull up their shawls, and lift their damp umbrellas; and Sarah Jane, who was full of excitement and satisfaction, proud of her white bonnet and her new frock, came tripping down the aisle to speak to some of those companions of her own, whose dingy dresses made such a wonderful contrast to her own bright and gay garb. "Didn't she behave beautiful? hasn't it gone off well?" said

Sarah Jane, triumphing over everyone who was not in pink muslin. And while she stood giving information of the future movements of the bridal pair, describing fully where "Arthur" was about to take Nancy, Durant bent forward to endeavour to induce Lucy to leave. He had forgotten all about Sarah Jane, but she had not forgotten him. She gave a little scream of surprise, and looked eagerly at the half-veiled young lady. Then she rushed off, forgetting even her pink muslin, and calling audibly on Arthur as she approached the door of the vestry, which the rest of the party had entered.

"Arthur! Arthur!" she called, rushing in among them, "there's one of your people there——"

"Hold your tongue," said her mother in alarm. "Sarah Jane! recollect you're in church."

"I'm speaking to Arthur, mamma; there's one of your people there, as sure as—as sure as anything, and Mr. Durant

with her. He did not see me," cried Sarah Jane, with an angry blush, "but I know him; and there's a young lady and an old lady."

"And quite natural too, and I'm very glad of it," said Mrs. Bates. "Fancy my staying away if it was Charley's wedding! I'll go and ask my lady to come and have a bit of dinner."

"It must be a mistake," said Arthur, paler than ever; "it cannot be my mother."

He put out his hand to stop Mrs. Bates; then he stood aghast, gazing after her. He could not leave his newly-made bride, and how could he meet his mother's eyes?

"Oh, go—go," said Nancy; "you needn't mind me." Then she herself melted, touched by the situation. "Yes, go, Arthur. I will wait for you," she said, with something that looked almost like dignity.

He dared not take her with him. He

went with mingled eagerness and reluctance, wondering, affected, ready to bless his mother, or to cast off all duty to her for ever.

He found Mrs. Bates haranguing old Davies, his mother's maid, calling her "my lady," and begging that she would do them the honour to come to the wedding breakfast.

"I don't pretend to call it breakfast, it's more like what your ladyship would call a lunch; but the young folks must have something substantial before they start on their journey—and we'll take it so friendly, and such an honour. It is just what we were wanting, and not daring to hope for, my lady," said Mrs. Bates, beaming. "Arthur, you can tell her ladyship—"

"Why, Davies, you!" cried Arthur, sharply, stung by sudden rage. "What are you doing here?"

"Davies! Ain't she my lady after all?" cried Mrs. Bates.

Lucy had been almost crouching in a corner of the pew; but when she saw her brother's troubled and worn face, she could not restrain herself.

"Oh, Arthur, how could you think mamma would come?" she said. "How could she come after the letter you sent her? But we could not let it be without one near you that loved you; and I am here," said Lucy, coming forward, putting back her veil, the tears rushing to her eyes.

Arthur was overcome by the sight of her, by the voice, by the incident altogether. He was so much excited and overcome that he could have cried too. He took his sister's outstretched hands, and kissed her cheek.

"Lucy, I will never forget this. Come and speak to Nancy, and then they can take you away."

Here Durant came forward, with a feeling that he would be condemned on all sides.

"I don't think Lady Curtis meant that your sister should see anyone," he said.

"Lucy, I suppose you are old enough to choose for yourself—is he the keeper of your conscience?" cried Arthur.

Lucy looked at her guardian, with a faint, deprecatory smile quivering on her lip.

"I must," she said; "I must! How can I help it?"

She seemed to ask his permission; and what was he that he should give or withhold permission? He stood aside, and with reluctant hands opened the pew-door.

Just then Nancy, tired of waiting, and drawn by potent curiosity, came forward alone. She had thrown back her bridal veil. It was natural that there should be a certain defiant expression on her face. She strolled towards them with an appearance of carelessness, a cavalier air. Nancy's heart was beating loudly enough.

She was afraid of the ladies whom she might be about to face, but that only made her put on a bolder and more saucy aspect. She was half-wounded that he should have left her for a moment, half-anxious for the result, and really eager and wistful, wishing to please if she could, had anyone been able to see into her heart. But an image of more complete defiance and saucy freedom than this girl, with her veil put up in a crumpled mass, approaching with a bold swing of her person and a loud-sounding step, could not have been found. All her virginal grace, her tender bridehood and womanhood, seemed to have suddenly flown.

Lucy looked up at her and quailed; her lip quivered more and more; she looked at Durant with an appeal, she looked at Arthur with a pitiful glance. Finally, she stepped forward, and said, softly,

"I must not stay. I wish you may be very, very happy, you and my brother.

Oh, Arthur, you know I wish you happy!" Then she made a pause, for Nancy gave no response. "I am sorry," she went on, faltering, "that it has all been so unhappy—that we have not known you—that Arthur has been so unkind; but it is not our fault."

"Oh, it does not matter," said Nancy. She was touched by the look of the girl who stood before her, but to give in was impossible. "It doesn't matter a bit. I don't suppose we should have got on, had we known each other. It is better it should be as it is."

And with this she turned and walked slowly back towards the vestry, turning her back upon them. Lucy stood still for a moment in dismay. Then she said, breathless,

"Good-bye, Arthur, good-bye! Davies will give you a letter, but don't open it now. Good-bye, and God bless you. Take me away, Mr. Durant, take me away! Come, come," she said, hastening

him as they got to the door. "I shall be crying again if we don't go, I am so silly. I don't care for the rain, only come, come away!"

Then they were out of doors again, in the wet street, at a distance even from old Davies, who came hobbling after them, the rain blowing in their faces, everything over. Lucy clung to his arm and hurried him on, choking the sobs that would come into her throat.

"How can I forgive myself?" he cried. "I have allowed you to be insulted—I, who would not let the wind blow on you if I had my will."

She remembered this after, and his agitated look, but did not see them then.

"Oh, it is not that," she said. "It does not matter, as she told me. But oh, Arthur! he does not belong to us any longer, he cares nothing about us!" cried Lucy, with the shock of discovery which no previous preparation in the mind can lessen.

She had said, as she came, that her brother was severed from his family; but now she saw it with her eyes, and felt the sharpness of the fact, so different from anticipation. Durant was full of a hundred compunctions, as if he had been the cause. He would have said philosophically enough to his own sister that it was the course of nature; but it seemed horrible, unnatural, that such a thing should happen to Lucy. The little suppressed sobs that came from her at intervals as they went back to the train, seemed to rend his own heart.

CHAPTER XII.

THOUGH it was his wedding-day, and though he was an impassioned lover, it would be impossible to describe the sensation of despair with which Arthur saw his sister and his friend hurry out of the church. His bride had left him on the other side, turning her back upon him. He was left there, with Mrs. Bates and old Davies! There was a tragical-ludicrous air about the group which seemed the very culmination of that squalor of the weather and the surroundings, which not even Nancy's bridal-wreath, and Sarah Jane's pink muslin could counteract. Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Davies were fitly

matched. They were ready to fly at each other's throats, metaphorically, as they stood there, confronting each other: Mrs. Bates red with confusion and wrath to think that she should have called this *person* my lady, and Davies dissolved in tears and speechless with indignation. What had young Arthur to do between them? They seemed like symbolical emblems of his fate. No longer to have to do with the beautiful things of this earth, grace, cultivation, loveliness; but with the meaner conditions, the bare, unattractive prose of existence. Everything that was shabby and rusty and poor had taken the place of all that was lovely and pleasant and of good report. Beauty and youth were evanescent qualities; they would flit away even from his bride; and what had he to look forward to but another Mrs. Bates as his final companion? This horrible idea did not communicate itself in so many words, but it flitted vaguely upon the air, giving Arthur a sudden horror of Mrs.

Bates, who had taken the place of his mother, as it seemed. He turned away to follow Nancy, but was stopped by old Davies, who called out a despairing "Oh, Master Arthur!" and put a letter, wet with unnecessary tears, into his hand.

"Is it from my mother, Davies?" he said.

"I don't know, Sir, if it's my lady or Miss Lucy. I was to have took it; I wasn't to have seen you; but now as I have seen you—oh, Master Arthur, Master Arthur, how could you, Sir?" cried Davies, with streaming eyes and uplifted hands.

He turned away with rage in his heart, clenching his hand involuntarily; but at that moment Mrs. Bates interfered, and changed the current of Arthur's feelings.

"You are a most impertinent person," said Mrs. Bates. "How dare you speak to my son-in-law so? And in church, too!

Though you are only a servant, you ought to know better."

"Davies!" cried Arthur, rushing back and taking the old woman's hands, "go after Lucy—quick! She is alone. But first say, 'God bless you!' dear old Davies. There never was a time that you did not say 'God bless you' before!"

"And I will say it!" cried the old woman. "I will say it, never mind who hears. Oh, Master Arthur, dear, God bless you! But you've broke my lady's heart, and Miss Lucy's too."

"Run after her—go, Davies, go! my sister is alone," cried Arthur, giving her such a grasp of his young hands, and turning her round towards the door with such impetuosity, that poor old Davies all but tripped upon the matting in the aisle.

He thrust the letter into his pocket, and went back to Nancy, who stood at the vestry door, looking round for him, with

nothing but disdain in her face, and little but dismay in her heart.

"If he leaves me like this now, what will he do after?" Nancy was saying to herself; and though she loved him dearly, and though it was a great marriage for Nancy Bates, her heart quailed for the moment at the difficulties before her, and she repented of the step she had just taken. She stood up against the vestry-door, defying her bridegroom and all his belongings, as it seemed, with dilated nostrils and curled lips, and insolent gaze. But in her heart, what a darkness of despair was quivering about poor Nancy! What had she done? Plunged into a new world, which was all against her, which was superior to her, in which she had nothing but Arthur, who already, ten minutes after he had pledged her his faith, had deserted her—for *them!* Oh, how much better to have stayed by the old mother, the shabby father who loved her! Her whole inner being was quivering with this

pang of sudden desolation and enlightenment. But with what a look of disdain and defiance she regarded her bridegroom as he came back to her! no softening in her eyes, however much there might be in her heart.

"Forgive me, Nancy," he said, gently. "You have a right to be vexed; but don't turn from me, my darling, as if I were unworthy a look."

"It is you who think me unworthy a look!" she cried, "you and your fine-lady sister, and all your grand friends. Oh, I am sure you would much rather go to them. If they had only come yesterday instead of to-day!"

"Hush, hush!" he said, taking her unwilling hand. She was everything he had in the world now, and any stirrings of anger that might rise in his mind were speedily suppressed by the emergency. People have more dominion even over their feelings than they think. He got rid of the resentment which springs so

quickly when the nerves are overstrung and the mind excited, by simple force of the position; for if he allowed himself to quarrel with Nancy, what remained to him? The situation was impossible. He drew her hand within his arm. "Is everybody ready?" he said. "We have not much time to lose. Come!" he added, lower. "Darling, we are going to leave all the trouble behind, both on your side and my side."

"There is no trouble on my side!"

"Well, then, on mine; we are leaving it all behind. Is not everything happiness, everything delight beyond this church door?"

She could not continue the controversy: for Arthur's face had regained the lover-look which Nancy had felt the absence of all that strange morning. She had to walk by his side, with her arm in his, and his soft words and glowing looks, and the way in which he held her hand upon his arm, gradually stole at once the

misery and the defiance out of her heart. She began to forget the untoward details, and to feel only the thrill of this mysterious thing which had happened. That she was no longer Nancy Bates but Mrs. Arthur Curtis, to be my Lady Curtis sometime—no longer a poor girl, the tax-collector's daughter, but a lady! All in a moment, this mystic change had been made. And she *was* changed; she felt it, with a sudden revulsion of sentiment. The laugh of Sarah Jane behind her filled her with a half impatient shame. She was annoyed to hear her mother telling over the just concluded incident. She herself had a right to be angry, but what had they to do with Miss Curtis' visit? Lucy's visit! that was what her brother's wife had a right to call her; but "the Bateses" had no right to interfere at all. Had Arthur said this, she would have blazed into high resentment and declared her family to be as good, if not better, than his; but in the seclusion of her private soul,

a seclusion not yet in any way impaired by the fact that she was married, this was how she was thinking. It gave her a sense of importance that Lucy had come. She had taken no notice of Arthur's family, but they had been compelled to take notice of her. And in time to come when she might have many battles to fight with them, it would be well to have this fact in hand. Accordingly, when the party arrived at home, it was Nancy who silenced her mother, whose indignation against Arthur for allowing her to address old Nurse Davies as my lady was great.

"Mamma, you will just stop that," said Nancy. "You went out of the room in a hurry before Arthur knew. Was it his fault?"

Mrs. Bates was thunderstruck. She had thought of a great many things that might happen, sooner than that Nancy should take up the cudgels for her new family.

"Bless us all!" she said, "is it a reason that no one should dare to speak, because you are Mrs. Arthur Curtis?"

But it was not a moment to quarrel. And when after the meal which Mrs. Bates had thought Lady Curtis would call a luncheon, the mother and sisters left the table with the bride, in a body, to change her dress, according to the well-understood formula of marriages, there was nothing but affection and tears, as is becoming at such a moment. There were no strangers present at the meal. It had been the strong desire of Sarah Jane that Mr. Raisins should be invited, he who it was understood was likely to cause another "wedding in the family" before long. But this had not been permitted, partly on account of Arthur, partly because there was no room.

"We must have your Uncle Sam, and how are we to squeeze in another?" Mrs. Bates had asked; and all Sarah Jane's indignant protestations about the impos-

sibility of a wedding "without one young man," were silenced by the physical impossibility. The limited number of the party thus took away much of the supposed festive character from the repast. But for the wedding cake on the table, it might have been a very ordinary domestic dinner; and even Sarah Jane's pink muslin was of little use to her, and had no effect to speak of upon her spirits. To be sure there were a few people coming to tea, whatever consolation might be got from that. The little parlour was hot and stuffy with eight people seated round the table; and no effort that Arthur could make could keep from his mind a sense of the grotesque incongruity of the scene. People who were passing peered in at the window to see the wedding party, and get a glimpse of the bride. Arthur had found the parlour an earthly paradise at almost every other hour; but he had not been in the habit of coming at this hour. He had never

even seen the family at their early dinner; and to have his health drank by Uncle Sam from Wapping was a new experience to him.

"I hope as you'll both be happy, Mr. Curtis, and that you'll have every satisfaction in Nancy," said Mr. Sam Bates, solemnly drinking a glass of the brown and filmy port which they all pledged the bride and bridegroom in. He looked at her as if she had been an article just sold, with a calculation of all the uses she might be put to, as he hoped she would give satisfaction. "I have heard a deal of my niece Nancy, and I know she's had a many advantages," he said. "I hope she'll act up to them, Mr. Curtis, and give you every satisfaction in the married state."

This was the toast of the day, and they all hoped that Arthur would have got up and made a speech; and when he only said, "I am much obliged to you, Mr. Bates," they were all a trifle disappointed, espe-

cially on account of Uncle Sam, who they felt required some practical proof that Nancy's husband was, in reality, the very fine gentleman and member of the upper classes which they had represented him to be—not perceiving that Sam's speech of itself proved his perception of the fact. And it was very strange that all these details, which would have amused Arthur greatly, with a kindly amusement without any gall in it, when he first began to come to the house, and which, even up to a very recent period, he would have regarded with amiable toleration, should have become unendurable to him now, at the very moment when he had become legally a member of the household party, and had more reason than ever before to judge them charitably, and look upon their doings and sayings with indulgent eyes; but so it was. How this should be, it is hard to explain, but it was quite natural to feel; and it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the impatience that was in

his mind to get away, and to carry Nancy away. She was his now—"there was no longer any occasion for him," he said, unconsciously to himself, "to put up with this." He was enfranchised. Soon there would be land and sea, miles and leagues of it, of English soil, and foreign ground between them; and it would be his own fault if he exposed himself to another dinner in that parlour. When Nancy went away to change her dress, attended by her mother and sisters, Mr. Bates got out the rum, and called to "the girl" for hot water.

"You'll take a drop before you start for luck," he said; and though Arthur would not take any, Sam Bates was very willing to do so. The smell of it sickened the young man, for the first time fastidious and critical. He got up and went to the window to look for the carriage which was coming to take his bride and himself away. They were going to Dover direct, to cross in a day or two. How he

counted the moments till he could get out into the fresh air, however damp and gloomy, never, with his will, to come back here any more.

But another shock awaited poor Arthur when Nancy came downstairs attired in the "silk" which was the crown of her little trousseau. It was light and thin, and rustled much, and was of a kind of salmon colour, between pink and brown, largely trimmed with flounces and fringes and bits of lace—every kind of florid ornamentation. The women were so proud of the effect, that Nancy was brought downstairs with the little brown jacket on her arm, which she was to wear over this resplendent garb, which, it seemed to Arthur's eyes, might have been worn at a flower-show on a brilliant day of summer; for he was not sufficiently trained in details to be aware how the cheap elaboration of Nancy's gown would have showed among the costlier productions of fashion.

"My! what a swell!" cried Charley Bates, while the two elders looked up complaisant from their rum and water. It was indeed a proud moment for the family.

"The thought I've had over this dress!" said the proud mother, with a pull here, and a pinch there to the cracking folds, "for you see there were so many things to think of; the present moment isn't everything; and if she takes care of it, it will be quite good for next summer, and always a handsome dress for an occasion. And then if they meet friends, and are asked out of an evening, there she is! what could be better? You may say she's a swell—but lasting was in my mind."

"It's a splendid costoom," said Uncle Sam. "I hope there's a something in the pocket for luck. And very pretty you look in it, Nancy, and I wish you health to wear it, my dear, and plenty more when that's done."

"She must not look for many like

this," said Mrs. Bates; "not just at present, till Sir John comes round. Parents may stretch a point, but I would never have a young woman be hard upon her husband. Turn round, dear, and show the basques. I never saw a dress that did Miss Snips more credit. But Arthur don't give his opinion. A shawl! Oh, if that isn't like a man! Cover her up in a shawl on her wedding-day!"

"But what if she catches cold on her wedding-day?" said poor Arthur.

He put his hand caressingly on the pinkness of the shoulder, and looked at his bride with all the show of admiration which he could put on to hide his secret horror. He was worn out with excitement and emotion, which, no doubt, was the reason why this final accident gave him such a shiver of horror.

Nancy, who had grown suspicious as he grew fastidious, took fire instantly. She flung away from his caressing touch.

"I'd better go upstairs again, and put on my old merino!" she cried, with a flush of passion, wheeling round with indignant impetuosity, and a fury of disappointment in her heart. They all caught and held her, while she struggled to get free.

"She was always like that," cried her mother. "She never could bear a word about her things. Nancy, dear, it ain't that he doesn't like it. It's all his anxiety for you."

"My dear Nancy, the carriage is here," cried Arthur, half frantic. "We shall lose the train. The dress is beautiful, but the day is cold and wet—"

"Don't you see, dear, he don't want you to spoil your lovely dress—"

"And be as hoarse as an old crow all the honeymoon," said the amiable Matilda. "That's what Arthur is thinking of, and right too! And here's my new shawl, that I brought down on purpose. Look at the coachman, off of his box, looking in."

This reduced them all to calm. The coachman sat serenely overhead, contemplating the scene in the parlour with much satisfaction. His attention, however, was chiefly centred in the steaming rum-and-water, which, though it disgusted Arthur, looked very comfortable to the damp cabman in the drizzle, who was elderly, and had no particular interest in the bride. "Lord, how some folks does enjoy themselves!" he was saying in his secret soul. And, fortunately, there was no more time to think of the dress. Matilda wrapped her sister in her big shawl, and they all pressed round with kisses and farewells, of which Arthur had his share. He did not like them to kiss him, but how could he help it? He was on his good behaviour, ready to accept and forgive everything so long as he could get away.

And when they at last drove from the door, what a relief it was! The Bates' all stood in a circle outside, waving good-

byes and yet more kisses, not heeding either the rain or the draggled spectators who stood by. Nor were the other missiles wanting which are common on such occasions. An old white shoe, one of those which Sarah Jane had danced to pieces on the night of the Volunteers' ball, thrown violently after them, glanced in at the window, and fell on the opposite seat as they set out. Never was there a more squalid spell discharged at the shy and doubtful happiness for which Arthur Curtis had paid so great a price. He took it between his finger and thumb, and pitched it out of the window. Perhaps that, too, was an injudicious step to take.

"I think you might have gone a little furthur off before you showed my folks how you despise them, Arthur," cried Nancy, with flaming cheeks.

Poor Arthur! there was not much laughter in his mood. But he made an effort to be light-hearted and gay.

"It was too dirty for anything," he said, laughing; and then he drew her within his arm, and said, "At last, Nancy! only you and I!"

"Yes; you have got rid of them all at last," said Nancy, making an effort to resist.

But, after all, they were in love with each other, and had been married that morning. The incipient hostility dropped, and he forgave her dress, and she forgave his criticism. Her manners were as imperfect as her gown; but now she was free from all influences that were perverse, and she was his Nancy—his bride, the girl he loved, the object of his choice. He had paid dearly for the prize he was carrying away. It was not the time, certainly, to look out for flaws in that prize now.

Thus they set off on their honeymoon, poor inexperienced young souls! He persuaded her, with no great difficulty, to stay in London first for a few days—

hoping to be able to correct the dress—for how could he take her to France, where dress means something, to travel in November in a salmon-coloured silk gown? This may seem a poor sort of thing to occupy a bridegroom's thoughts. But then the vehemence of a reformer and missionary was added in Arthur's case to the new sense of responsibility that was upon him. He must make her perfect—if he could.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE long avenue at Oakley was as dreary as the damp street of Underhayes. The rain drizzling, a constant soft downfall, half of the chilly shower, half of the yellow leaves, going on without intermission. Here and there one of the great oaks from which the place had its name, stood up all russet and solid, with the dry leaves clinging to its branches; here were feeble flutters of denuded sycamore and lime, there elms standing up in a forlorn faded greenness, all rusty, shabby, ragged, their year's clothing worn out. The house itself appeared in glimpses as they drove along, grey and cold with its broad low

front stretching along the damp terraces, which were so green with the wet as to put everything out of harmony. The neighbourhood was proud of Oakley Hall, which was said to be pure Italian, Palladian, or something finer still if there is any finer word. It had an imposing front with pediments and pillars, supposed to be white, but at present the very colour of cold, damp and mournful. Lady Curtis shivered as they drove along, sighting it by glimpses, now more, now less distinctly through the trees. It was her home, but there was not much sympathy between the lively quick-feeling woman and the blank splendour of the cold long-drawn-out house. She was never fond of it at any time. What she would have given for red brick! but Palladio was very much more dignified if not so kindly. "How dismal we shall be without Arthur," she said as they approached. They had not talked very much to each other on the journey. All

that could be said about Arthur had been said on the night of Lucy's return from Underhayes, but it was not possible to keep absolute silence about him now. The house was so full of Arthur; they seemed to see him upon the steps, in the avenue, appearing across the park with his gun. And now he had disappeared from the place. Their own sudden departure, when they first heard of his folly, had broken up the lingering remnant of a shooting party which had assembled at Oakley, chiefly for Arthur's pleasure, but which no persuasions had induced Arthur to join. Now the men and their guns were all gone, and there was an interval of quiet before them till Christmas, when Sir John's habitual party of parliamentary friends would assemble. Nothing but mourning could interfere with that; and, "we can't put on mourning for Arthur, though God knows we might, if separation was all that was meant by it," said Lady Curtis.

"Oh, mamma!" said Lucy with her usual tone of gentle remonstrance.

Lady Curtis was very quick and outspoken. She said a great many things with her lips which people in general say only in the seclusion of their mind. Lucy *faisait les cornes* again when her mother spoke of mourning for Arthur. The suggestion was intolerable to her. It threw an additional cloud upon the dreary streaming avenue and the grey blank of the eyeless house.

Sir John, who was in reality expecting them anxiously, did not come to the door to meet them, being a little too late in moving from his chair in the library, which was his way. There were often advantages in it; and perhaps to-day, as on other occasions, it was just as well that it was in his library he received his wife and daughter, instead of meeting them in the full sight of the servants. Sir John was a tall grey-haired man with a sort of homely dignity about him. He

was not clever, and often enough the ladies felt it was difficult to get an idea into his head—and when the idea was in his head, he was in the way of treating it somewhat hardly, as if it was a thing rather than an idea. He could not play with plans and intentions as his wife's quick mind loved to do—and when he received a blow, it crushed him with a sort of solid monotony to which there was no relief. He had not believed it possible that Arthur would persevere with a marriage which was so seriously against his interests, and had thought it only "some of my lady's nonsense," to think that this very fact would make Arthur more decided in throwing himself away. But now that the thing was done, he would allow no hope in it. His son was lost—the prey probably of a bad, certainly of a designing woman, seeking her own interests alone. He might as well die at once for any good that was likely to come of him now. And in consequence of

this determination, on the part of Sir John that such a thing could not happen, the final act in the drama having taken him entirely by surprise, notwithstanding all warnings, had shaken him enormously in his health as well as in his immediate comfort. "He might as well be dead," he had said, after he knew that there was no more hope; and those were the words which he repeated by way of greeting to his wife and daughter.

"He might as well be dead at once—why did you let him do it?" he cried. "If I had ever thought he could have been such a fool, I should have taken care to be on the spot myself," said Sir John.

He had no curiosity about his son, where he was going—what he was doing. He might as well have been dead. To be sure when he himself was dead, Arthur must come back and reign in his state; but then Sir John felt no necessity within himself that he should ever die. It was so far off, that it was unnecessary to cal-

culate upon that remote contingency, and in the meantime it was his son who had departed out of this life, left it altogether without possibility of return. He had spent these last few days very mournfully in the solitude of his vast house. One or two intimate friends had come to see him, but he had not cared to receive their visits. The Rector had been there for a long time that very day preaching strange doctrines: that a thing being done could not be undone, and that it would be wise now to make the best of everything that happened. The Rector was a Curtis too, Sir John's own nephew, and though he was shocked by this domestic incident, he was aware that it would be best not to allow it to come to anything scandalous. He had ventured to suggest that, perhaps, things might turn out better than they appeared. "Better!" said Sir John, "he might as well have been dead." He had been able to think of nothing else since he had heard of it; and his thoughts of Arthur were

all of the kind which come into the minds of those who have lost their children. All the old forgotten nursery stories came back to him. What a boy he was—so active, so strong, such a good shot for his years, ready to ride at any thing, and with an opinion of his own on politics and all that. While he sat in his library pretending to read and write (and what is it that elderly gentlemen find to do when they are shut up for day after day, pretending to read and write in their libraries?) these fancies came surging up about him exactly as if Arthur had been dead. He would put down his paper suddenly to think out a little joke of his when he was five, or a school-boy prank at fifteen. What promise, what ability, a hundred times cleverer than ever I was! and all to end in this. The dull surprise in his mind was inexhaustible; how could he be such a fool—how could he commit moral suicide in this way? And why had not his mother put a stop to it? This

dull misery which he was suffering did not affect Sir John's ordinary habits; he went on, to all outward appearance, just as usual. He fulfilled every duty he had been accustomed to; ate at the usual times, took all the usual courses at dinner, and presented an imperturbable countenance to the butler and the footman who waited upon him; but his heart was heavy with the thought of his son who was lost. Though he was so glad to have his wife and daughter back again, he met them almost with reproaches.

"You went away, but you have not done any good," he said. "I expected little, but still you might have been of some use—and you have been of no use. It is exactly as if he were dead."

"Oh, papa, not that," cried Lucy; but Lady Curtis only cried as she dropped into the big chair by the fire to get a little warmth. She felt at first as if her husband had a right to reproach her, notwithstanding that she had done everything

she could; for she had left him with perhaps a boast of her own influence, and with very high hopes. It had seemed to her that Arthur must yield; and not only had Arthur not yielded, but all the harm that had been threatened was accomplished, and their only son was lost to them. She could not contradict what Sir John said. She was humbled, she who had been so confident; she had gone away almost promising to bring him back with her, confident in her power over her boy. Never before had her husband gained such an advantage. He had a kind of right to jibe at her henceforward, if he chose to exercise it. She had nothing to answer to him. It was quite true what he had said. What difference would it have made had the boy died.

"I never thought it would come to this," said Sir John, "not that I believed in your remonstrances; but I could not have believed that the fellow was such a fool. What does he suppose he will make by it? He had everything that heart could desire,

a good allowance, a good home; and to go and cut his own throat as it were, to make an end of himself! He might just as well have done it at once. He will never be of any good again."

"It is quite true, it is quite true," said Lady Curtis, "all that your papa says is true." Her heart was so wrung that she scarcely knew whom she was addressing, Arthur, who had gone away in his disobedience, or Lucy, in whom there were faint appearances of standing up for her brother. The mother would not divest herself of the sense of a domestic audience to be convinced, whom perhaps their papa might be effectual with, though she had failed herself.

"What he could think he was to gain by it!" Sir John resumed, encouraged by this support, which he did not always receive from his wife. "Debt and that sort of thing is bad enough, and we know how young men are drawn into it; but what could anybody suppose this was

going to be but ruin and destruction; what could he think there was to gain?"

"Oh, papa!" Lucy could not keep silence any longer. It was not the habit of the house to allow papa to have everything his own way. When Arthur's youthful peccadilloes had been discussed hitherto, Lady Curtis, however she might object to his conduct, had always been his champion with his father, and one of the greatest marvels and most confusing circumstances of all was this silence on her part, and surrender as it were of Arthur to be crushed as Sir John pleased. Lucy could not be still and hear it all. "Oh, papa!" she cried, "you speak as if poor Arthur thought of nothing but his own interest; was he so selfish? you know that he never thought of what was for his interest at all. Cannot you believe that he loved her, and that this was his motive?"

"My dear," said Sir John, "I was not speaking to you. You stand up for one

another as is natural. But see, even your mother has not a word to say."

This roused Lady Curtis from her depression. "I disapprove of it all as much as you can do, John; I am as unhappy; but still I do not think there was any calculation in Arthur's mind; how should there have been? It was the height of foolishness and wicked hastiness, but he knew he could get nothing by it—he knew it was ruin, as you say."

"Why did he do it then?" cried Sir John with outspread hands, appealing to heaven and earth, his eyebrows raised, shaking his head and looking about as if for an answer. Perhaps he felt his son's defection the most of all of them, although when all was well with Arthur he was not one of the fathers who cultivate their sons unduly, but on the contrary was often impatient of Lady Curtis's interest in anything connected with the boy, and her anxiety about him. "What could happen to him?" Sir John was in the

habit of saying, when, as sometimes happened, there would be a commotion in the house because Arthur did not write often enough. "Depend upon it he is all right." This had been his mood before; but now he seemed to miss Arthur wherever he turned. A thousand questions seemed to arise on which he would have liked to consult him; he wanted him to shoot a too-well preserved preserve, he wanted him to say what he thought about those new cottages which had to be built. Sir John did not see the need of new cottages; *he* did not want a new house, he was contented with his old one; and why should not other people be content? but in case the cottages should be forced upon him he should have liked to know what Arthur thought. Now that he was gone, there seemed to arise some special reason for appealing to him almost every day. It was as if he had died.

And there was a long silence in the big

still room where the family had met together after their misfortune. How few families are there which have not known such sorrowful silences: when there is one absent to be bitterly blamed, and some one in fretful anguish cries out, and the others heartbroken, try for excuses and find nothing to say. This was how it was. The mother and daughter had talked it over till there seemed no more to add, but Sir John had not had this relief. All his pain and anger had been locked up in his own bosom, and now they burst forth. "What did he do it for? What did he suppose he could make by it?" Sir John did not believe that his son thought anything could be made by it, but how was he to repress the intolerable pang in his own heart for Arthur's loss and ruin? And yet he was angry that nobody defended Arthur when he stopped speaking. He was angry also when the women attempted to defend him. It did not much matter which it was. He was silent for a

moment; and the dull sky outside, and the dull air with its double rain from the clouds and the trees filled up the great windows with dreariness, adding another element of depression, and Lady Curtis gazed drearily into the fire stooping over it, to get a little warmth, and Lucy stood by the table motionless with tears upon her cheek. Then Sir John burst forth again.

"If there had been anything to justify it, you know! One has heard of a man losing his head for a great beauty, something out of the way—a syren, you know. But a village girl, and, from all I hear, a virago, a temper—"

"Don't let us speak of her," said Lady Curtis, with a movement of disgust. "It's enough that he has done it. Oh, the foolish, foolish boy! Separated himself entirely from his own sphere, and his natural life, and us."

"Mamma," said Lucy, breathless, "I don't want to excuse Arthur; but what

could you say worse of him, both papa and you, if he had done something *wrong?*"

They both turned upon her, furious: yet so thankful to her for standing up for him with whom both were wroth beyond words.

"Wrong!" they both cried in one breath. "Are you mad, child? Do you think he has not done wrong?"

"He has been very, very foolish," cried Lucy, growing pale. "Yes, he is wrong; oh, yes, I know he is wrong. But if he had done something shameful, *wicked*, mother—people's sons have done so—sin—crime—you could not take it more seriously, you could not say worse of him."

"Sin!" said Sir John. "Lucy, you are a girl, you don't understand things. A man might be sinful enough, and not cut himself off like this. It is worse, ever so much worse, both for him and us, than what girls like you call sin."

"No, papa!" cried Lucy, with flash-

ing eyes. "I will not hear you speak so of Arthur. He has been disobedient to you; but he is a man. God does not mean us always to be obedient like little children. And he has done nothing that is wrong. I will not hear anyone say so."

"Wrong!" cried Lady Curtis, rising in her indignation and pain. "Do you call it right to bring misery and disgrace into a family, to break off all his old ties for a new one, to throw off father and mother, and duty and honour, for the sake of a fancy, for the sake of a pretty face? What does he know more of her than a pretty face? Love! is that what can be called love?—for the sake of his own will and self-indulgence, the unkind, selfish boy!"

And then she sat down again and cried bitterly, which was a relief to her. Sir John could not cry, but he got angry, which was a relief to him.

"Let me never hear you excuse him

again," he cried, "or you will make me fear that you are not to be trusted either. What, Lucy! you think children are not to be expected to obey their parents—you, a girl! Then, God help us, what have we to expect, your mother and I?—our only boy lost to us in a disgraceful connection, and our only girl ready to follow his example."

"Papa!" cried Lucy, indignant, yet trembling.

"Is that the prospect before us? It is kind of you to give us warning: and to take such a moment for doing it, when we are crushed sufficiently, I should think." Then he changed from this pathetic, sarcastic tone, and turned upon her with fierce and threatening looks. "But mind you, Lucy, I'll shut you up, as fathers had a right to do once. I'll keep you on bread and water—by Heaven, I will—before you disgrace yourself like Arthur, right or wrong!"

"Hush, hush!" cried Lady Curtis,

roused. "Oh, John, you forget yourself. Lucy, Lucy, your papa does not mean it. We don't distrust you. Fancy distrusting Lucy, our Lucy, John! Oh, we are not come to that!" and she went to her daughter, and kissed her, and held her close in her arms.

Lucy had not said a word, but she had raised her head as her father vituperated, and fixed her eyes upon him steadily. She was not a girl to be frightened; but her mother grew frightened looking at her, and seeing the pale indignation and firmness in her face.

"Of course, I never meant that," said Sir John, fretfully, sitting down in his chair with an angry *thud* which seemed but an echo of his sigh. "Why do you put your fantastic meanings into a man's plain words? Hadn't you better go and get your things off, and make yourselves comfortable? And you can send me a cup of tea. It is all this wretched, depressing day."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE Rector came up next morning to see his aunt and his cousin, and hear their story. Nothing for a long time had interested him so much; and though he was very sorry for Arthur, and sorry for those who had so much to suffer on Arthur's account, there was a latent feeling in Hubert Curtis's mind that some advantage, more or less, though he could not exactly tell what, was likely to come to himself from Arthur's misconduct. He did not wish to profit by his cousin's loss, but the impression was strong on his mind that this was likely to be the case whether he wished it or not, and, naturally, it

moved him to a certain excitement. Hubert Curtis was not speciallly adapted to be a clergyman; in fact, it might, perhaps, be said that, of all professions for which he was unadapted, the Church was the chief. It had not been thought of for him till he was eighteen, just leaving Eton, and with thoughts of a crack regiment and all the pleasure of life in his mind. By that time Arthur was fifteen, and it had become quite apparent that there was no likelihood of a second son at the Hall to hold the living of Oakley, as was the tradition in the family; and Sir John's uncle, who was the then incumbent, was old and growing infirm. This being the case, there was a hurried consultation on the subject in the family; in consequence of which General Curtis paid a short visit to his brother at Oakley. It was because of that uncle, who was still a young man, in possession of Oakley Rectory when Anthony Curtis, Sir John's younger brother, grew up, that he him-

self had been made a soldier instead of a clergyman. He was now a General in the Indian Army, with a tolerable fortune, and sons enough to reinforce all the professions. Hubert was his second boy; he was a lively fellow, full of fun, as his family said, and in those days rather apt to get into scrapes—the very boy for the Army. And when the General came home and announced the result of the family conclave, which was that Hubert, instead of putting on a red coat, was to go to the University and study for the Church, there was much tribulation in the old house at Kensington, where the General lived with all his children. The sisters wept with Bertie, who was in despair, and Mrs. Curtis went about the house with a mournful countenance, saying to everydody, "It is so much for his interest, it is a thousand a year." After a while, it is true, this consideration healed and bound up even the broken heart of Bertie. A man does not come

easily into possession of a thousand a year as a soldier, and it was not pretended that he was clever to push his way to the front of his profession; whereas here his income would be certain and immediate, and nothing would depend on his cleverness. The parish was small; there was a capital house, very good society, good shooting, fishing, everything a man could desire; and as for the duty, there was not very much of that, and by means of a curate it would always be possible to diminish what little there was.

Thus matters were smoothed down, and Bertie went to the University; and in due time, on his uncle's death, became the Rector of Oakley, like all his grand-uncles before him. He was so far conscientious that he did not keep a curate, the parish being one which contained about two hundred of a population only—that is, he did not keep a permanent curate, though he indulged freely in occasional aid. But it may be supposed that in these circumstances

Bertie Curtis was not, perhaps, so adapted for his work, or so devoted to it as most of the other clergymen of whom we are so proud in England. He liked his ease, which they are not supposed to do, and that liberty of going where he liked, and doing what he liked, which only the richer members of his profession can indulge in. He went to all the races all over the country, and betted a good deal in a quiet way; but, to be sure, the village people did not know where he was when he was absent from home, and he might just as well have been at a meeting of the Church Union as at the Doncaster meeting. And Sir John and the other magnates did not care. Some of them said Bertie Curtis was thrown away where he was, such a good fellow! He "got on" just as well as if he had been the most devoted parish priest under the sun. In externals he was good-looking enough, with the good features and high nose which belonged to the family; of good height, rather over than under

middle size, but not tall; well-made, well-dressed, active, and not stupid—on the whole, an attractive, agreeable Squire-parson, quite benevolent enough, and not disposed to be uncivil or disagreeable to any man. Poachers he hated by nature, dissenters he disliked professionally, though he was too much of a gentleman even to notice them; but otherwise he was friendly enough to everybody who did not interfere with him.

This was the man who came up to the Hall, concerned and interested, to inquire about Arthur—feeling very sorry for Arthur, yet with an indistinct but not unpleasant consciousness that one way or another Arthur's mistake and failure in life must be good for himself. There was one little weakness which Hubert had: an inclination towards his cousin Lucy, who did not at all incline towards him. Up to the present moment it cannot be said to have gone the length of love, but he felt that it would be in every

respect very suitable if Lucy and he could "hit it off together." Sir John would like to have his daughter settled so near him, and Lucy's fortune would be a very comfortable addition to Bertie's thousand a year; and then he liked her better than any of the girls about, better than all the young ladies whom, he modestly felt, he might have for the asking. There are indeed, it must be avowed, a great many young ladies in the world to whom a thousand a year is as attractive as it proved to Bertie Curtis, and who, being unable to get it as Bertie Curtis did, have to "go in for" the clergyman, instead of going in legitimately for the living, as it is the man's proud privilege to do. But none of these aspirants pleased him as Lucy did, who was not an aspirant at all. In this the contradictoriness of human nature showed itself. He liked Lucy; but Lucy did not care for him. She did not go so far as to dislike her cousin, but she perceived as girls of

fantastic notions have a way of doing that Bertie's aims were not very high; and he was not old enough to be looked up to, and to have his faults condoned like the kind old uncle whose place he occupied, who was not an ideal parish priest any more than Bertie, but whom Lucy would not permit anyone to criticize.

When the Rector was seen coming up the avenue next morning, neither Lady Curtis nor Lucy was delighted by the sight. "He is coming to ask after Arthur, that pink of propriety who never did anything imprudent or compromised himself for other people," said Lady Curtis; which perhaps was not quite just; for Hubert had "compromised himself," if that was any credit to him, often enough when he was at the University, before it became his profession to be good. But there are many mothers and sisters who will understand Lady Curtis's feelings. To be sympathized with when your scapegrace is out

of favour by some respectable contemporary who never was in anybody's black books in all his virtuous life, is not that more than feminine flesh and blood can bear? Does not one hate the virtuous youth who has always so wisely shunned the broad path and the green? And Bertie was especially obnoxious to this hatred. Bertie who frequented all the race-courses in a black tie, and had a book on every great "event," and yet was always so decorous, keeping within the bounds of clergymanly correctness, though he never professed to be devoted to his profession. Had he been an open humbug and hypocrite, he would have offended these ladies less. They knew how sympathetic he would be about Arthur, how he would "understand his feelings," and yet show in his faultless manly demeanour how weak it was of Arthur to throw himself away. Lucy's first impulse had been to leave the room when she saw Bertie appearing, but she was convinced of the

futility of this when Lady Curtis sprang to her feet impatiently. "There is Bertie," she cried, "Lucy, you always get on with Bertie, I really cannot put up with him to-day."

"But you would not leave me alone—not alone—to entertain Bertie to-day."

"My dear, what does it matter, he is your cousin," said Lady Curtis; and then she changed her mind and took her seat again. "Of course he is sure to speak to me about it some time or other — as well to-day as any day," she said; "but oh, Lucy, to see him sitting there so correct and proper, and my Arthur— !" cried the vexed mother.

"Arthur has done nothing wicked," said Lucy, elevating her head, with again that look of resolution in her eyes. Lady Curtis did not understand this look. She was afraid of it. She asked herself could Lucy have anything on her mind? Lucy would not and could not emulate Arthur. No chance that she would distress her

parents with a lover of low degree, or any man who was not a gentleman. But then if Lucy "took anything into her head," that would be worse than anything Arthur could do. A trembling came over Lady Curtis. It was hard enough to lose her son, but Lucy seemed now everything she had in the world. While these thoughts were passing through her mind, Bertie was shown into the room. There were some clerical tricks which he had learned, though he did not assume a clerical deportment generally. He would take the hand of a sufferer and press it with silent meaning, with eyes full of sympathy, and if anything in the world could have exasperated Lady Curtis more than the mere fact of his coming, it would have been this deeply-meaning look from Bertie's eyes.

This however was got over, and so was the close pressure of the hand which seemed to say so much, and Bertie sat down. The ladies were in a small morning-room which they were fond of, which

opened out upon the green terrace in summer; and there they lived half out of doors in a kind of stony bower formed by two of the pillars which adorned the front of the house. The windows were very long and straight, the room was furnished luxuriously, in a taste which is scarcely approved by the art-standards of the present day. But they liked it for very different reasons: Lady Curtis because she had herself furnished it, arranged every festoon of the drapery, and chosen every scrap of the Louis Quinze furniture: and Lucy because she had always known it like this and could not bear any change. Lady Curtis sat with her back to the light, that at least Bertie might not see the effect of his condolences. His face was so serious, so sympathetic, so full of feeling, that few people could have withstood it. He did not say much as he pressed their hands, and after he sat down there was a pause. Lady Curtis had grasped at her work

when he appeared. It is a great safeguard to a woman to have a piece of work which she can bend her head over, and thus avoid the inspection of such serious eyes. "I heard you had got home yesterday," he said, "I am sure my uncle will mend now that you are here."

"Was papa ill," said Lucy, "while we were away?"

"Ill is not the word, perhaps: but one could not help seeing that he was very unhappy. He will be better now. I came up to the Hall to see if I could be of any use in amusing him a little, but it was not me he wanted. And how is Arthur? I hope you saw him before—"

"Yes, thanks, I saw him," said Lucy, "he is very well. There has never been anything the matter with him that I know of."

"No, not with his health of course; and I hope, aunt, you were more satisfied about—the lady—than we hoped;—or I should say feared—"

"If you mean Mrs. Arthur," said Lady

Curtis, forcing herself to speak the words steadily, "I did not see her, Bertie. I did not wish to see her; therefore I cannot give you any opinion on the subject."

"Nay," he said gently, "I did not want any opinion. I only trusted that you had been—pleased, or, at least, less displeased—than we fancied. I suppose they have gone abroad?"

"I suppose so," said Lucy rather drearily. This cross-questioning was insupportable to her also; but she was not of an impatient temper like her mother; accordingly while Lady Curtis fumed, it was Lucy who had to speak.

"That will be a good thing," said the Reverend Bertie, "so much can be done abroad. It is really the place to go to when a little polish is wanted. The very fact of living among foreigners is good for one in the way of culture, and Arthur himself has such good manners. I hope you will not think it an impertinent ques-

tion—but I hope, my dear aunt, there is no open breach ?"

"What do you mean by an open breach ?" she said indignantly. "You talk as if Arthur had murdered some one. If you will tell me plainly what you want to know, I will endeavour to give all the necessary information."

"My dear aunt! is it not natural I should like to know? Arthur and I have always been good friends. In happier circumstances, I should have married him, or helped to have married him—surely you don't think it is mere vulgar curiosity. I don't conceal that I should like to know."

Lady Curtis threw her work aside. She could not keep up the appearance of calm. "I am sure you mean very well, Bertie," she said, (though, indeed, she was by no means so very sure). "And, perhaps, I am not so patient as I ought to be. I can't talk my boy over as if he were a stranger. Arthur has been very foolish—"

"You think I don't understand," said the Rector, "do you think I am so unfeeling? I know how hard it must be, and Sir John is very severe. But after all, what is done cannot be undone. Things of this kind so often turn out better than anyone expected. This is why I wanted to know if you had seen the lady. If she has sense, it may all come right, indeed it may—women are so quick, they pick up things so fast. I wish you would let me persuade you to take a little comfort. Things may not be nearly so bad as they seem."

All this was so well said that even the suspicious mother could not make any objections. After all, the chief thing against him was that *he* was not under a cloud, that he had not made an imprudent marriage; and it was hard to refuse his kindness, and treat him as an enemy on that account. Lady Curtis, who was changeable by right of her quick temper and feelings, melted all at once, and

opened her mind to him—her mind at least, if not her heart.

"If she had been a girl with any feeling how could she have married so?" she cried. "Not one friend with him—his father and mother holding aloof. No, Bertie, it is very good of you to say so, but I have not any hope. Our boy is lost to us. Of course, when we are out of the way, he will come and take his place here, and she will take my place, which is no pleasant thing to think of; but in the meantime we have lost our boy."

"Indeed, you must not think so," said the Rector, "when the first infatuation is over, Arthur will come back. He will not be happy in so different a sphere. He will miss you—he will miss Lucy—and all his old ways. In—how long shall I say? in a month, six weeks—he will come back and beg your pardon."

"I hope he will not have so little perception," said Lady Curtis, the colour

rising in her face. "You speak as if it were a case in which such a conclusion was possible; and no doubt there are such cases; but this girl—this girl is— Don't ask me—how can I tell you all the impossibilities of it? I see them, and I know that Arthur is lost to us. As his poor father says, 'he might as well be dead!'"

Lucy had not said anything, but Lady Curtis saw without looking that her daughter was not on her side. Lucy's head was very erect—her mouth was closed firmly, as if she was holding herself in; there was a certain resistance in the poise of that head, and displeasure in the mouth. Lady Curtis stopped short after she had answered her nephew, and turning suddenly round to her daughter burst forth: "Say what you mean, Lucy — say what you mean! I would rather have anything said to me than see you keep it in and despise what your mother says."

"How could I despise what you say, mamma," said Lucy, "or what you think

either? But I should like Bertie to know that I cannot blame Arthur as other people do. He is dreadfully wrong in some things; but we can't tell he is wrong at all in the great thing. Mamma, I cannot help it—I don't want to vex you. For anything we know, she may be the one wife in the world for Arthur; and when he was promised to her, pledged to her, and had got her love, and given her his—I should have hated my brother if he had forsaken her. Yes, I know you will be angry—but I can't help it. I might have been glad in a way—it might have been better for the family; but I should have hated and despised him. He could never have been Arthur to me any more—that, indeed, would have been as bad as dying," said Lucy emphatically with fire in her eyes.

Lady Curtis was so moved with displeasure that she could scarcely find words to reply. "You, Lucy, you! to

go and put yourself on the side of such a creature."

"I don't put myself on her side, but Arthur has done nothing irremediable—I cannot, I cannot allow it to be said! Oh, foolish, foolish! unwise, unkind, ill-judged, whatever you please," she said, "but he has done nothing against his honour, or against nature. He may repent it bitterly; but what he has done is not irremediable, I cannot have it said."

"All for love," said the Rector musing, with a half smile, "and the world well lost!"

"I do not mean anything nonsensical," said Lucy, blushing hotly with the shame of youth for being supposed capable of high-flown sentiment. "I am speaking of mere truth and honour. What is a man who is false to his word? who can be shaken off by other people's interference from the most solemn engagements a man can make? I had not thought of

it when we left home. It seemed just like going to get Arthur out of any foolish scrape—as you did when he was saucy at Eton—and when he got into trouble about his work. But this is different—a man must keep his word."

"When he has made mad promises that will ruin him—when he is cheated into vows he does not mean—when he makes engagements that will be the torment and destruction of his life?"

"I—I—suppose so—when he has given his word," said Lucy, overwhelmed by her mother's vehemence, and by the sudden sense that even to this subject, which seemed so distinct, there was a second side.

CHAPTER XV.

"I HOPE you are not vexed by the interest I take in it," said the Rector. "I fear my aunt is, though why, I cannot imagine; but, Lucy, I wish you would trust me, and tell me what you can. Who has a better right to be interested than I have? Not to say that I have been fond of Arthur all his life, and that he is one of my nearest relations, next thing to a brother, already."

There was something in the way in which he pronounced this "already" which roused Lucy, she did not quite know why. It seemed to convey an insinuation that there were still closer connections possible. She interrupted him hastily.

"I never knew that Arthur and you were such very good friends. Oh, yes, cousins, of course. But cousin means almost anything, much or little, as people like."

"That is not a very kind speech," he said. "I always thought I had a certain right both to Arthur and you; but when you say this—"

"I do not mean anything unkind, but it is so. When people have been brought up together it is different. Arthur's great friend," said Lucy, firmly, and with decision, though with a slight additional colour, "who is like a brother to him, is Mr. Durant."

The Rector smiled.

"You snub me very unmercifully," he said, "and I don't know why either. I suppose you mean that Arthur does not care for me. Well, of course, if it is so, one must put up with that. Durant? yes, Durant, I know, was his great ally; but since they have lost all their money,

I thought Durant could not afford to keep up idle friendship; so, at least, it was said."

"He has been very kind to Arthur. I don't know if you call that an idle friendship."

"My dear cousin Lucy, I don't want to say a word that is disagreeable to you. If you think Durant a better friend for Arthur than I am—"

"I was not saying what I thought, or giving any opinion about best or better. I was only speaking of the fact."

"Well, so be it," he said with a sigh; "but, at all events, you will not deny that there are few people to whom Arthur and his wife can be more important in the future. We are likely to live our lives out side by side."

"You mean after papa—"

"Now you are angry with me again! It may be years and years hence, and I hope it will; but in the course of nature, and my uncle would be the first to wish it,

Arthur will succeed him. We are both a great deal younger than Sir John; and I suppose I am here for life—unless you are unkind to me, Lucy, and make me indifferent to everything," he said, lowering his voice.

She took no notice of this, unless by quickening her pace, and insensibly withdrawing a little further from his side. They were walking down together to the village, where Lucy had her favourite old women to see after her return home. She had no excuse for refusing her cousin's escort, and why should she refuse it? He was very nice; there was nothing in him that any lady could object to. He was her own near relative, and their way was the same as far as the village, and she liked him well enough. Why had everybody at the Hall this unexpressed, incipient distrust of Hubert Curtis? Lucy could not tell; and perhaps it was not necessary to have such a feeling to explain her little proud movement aside, her slight

withdrawal when he spoke in this tone of subdued tenderness. She did not choose that her cousin should be tender to her, and therefore it was quite natural that she should withdraw.

"I suppose you are right," she said. "Of course, you are a great deal younger than papa; but it gives one a shock to think what may happen when he—I prefer, for my part, not to think of it. Yes," Lucy continued, with that sudden inconsistency which she had from her mother; "of course, Arthur and his wife will be of importance to you when we are all away from the Hall; and you have a right to hear all I can tell you. Well, Cousin Bertie—"

"May I not protest against this?" he said. "You are not kind to me, Lucy. What an air of selfish, interested, business-like curiosity you put upon the simple sentiment I expressed!"

At this Lucy blushed once more; for to be thought capable of imputing base

motives, was not that as bad as to be base one's self?

"I beg your pardon," she said; "perhaps I am twisted a little—the wrong way. How can one help that, when everything has gone so contrary? Well, I will tell you all I know, and you must forgive me if I was disagreeable."

"You are never disagreeable," he said, in again that objectionable tone, and with a world of objectionable meaning, "to *me*."

Lucy veered a little further off from him, as if she had been forced by the wind, but went on taking no notice of the interruption.

"I saw her, for a moment. Yes, I thought you would be surprised. She is very handsome; and I was prejudiced—of course I was prejudiced. I thought, as women, I suppose, always do, that she looked bold, not as a girl should. I have no doubt," said Lucy, with a sigh, "that she thought the same of me."

"No one could think that of you."

"Oh, perhaps not that, but something equally disagreeable. She thought most probably that I was proud. She did not speak to me. I said I hoped she would be happy," said Lucy, dropping her voice, "and I hope I meant it, but I am not quite sure. Of course, I wish Arthur to be happy, and he cannot be happy unless his wife is. So that, at least, makes my wish quite sincere."

"And she did not speak to you! She did not think it an honour, the greatest honour that could have been done her—"

"Why should she think it an honour? It was her wedding-day. She was the first person to be thought of. And I did not mean to see her, at least, to speak to her. I did not mean that Arthur should find me out. Oh!" cried Lucy, with sudden compunction, "I retract all I said just now. When she came into the church, before she knew that I was there, she did not look bold. She looked beautiful, yes,

beautiful! happy and serious, and not thinking who was there. Just, I should think, as a girl who is going to be married ought to look," said Lucy, with a soft mantling of colour, less than a blush, impersonal, meaning the soft thrill of fellow-feeling, nothing more.

"But afterwards—you thought her bold?—who is she? Did you see her people? Has she any people?" said Bertie, "that is almost as important as herself."

Lucy gave a slight shudder, which was not thrown away upon her companion. She had scarcely seen the rest of the Bates' at the time, but now the peculiarities of the other members of the group seemed to come back to her with the retrospective memory which excitement possesses. She could see them now—the shabby father upon whom that beautiful girl leant, the mother in her Paisley shawl, and the flippant Sarah Jane. These were the "people" of her brother's wife.

She made no reply, and her cousin went on.

"What a blessing that so much of the estate is entailed! Radicals may speak as they please about the law of entail, but how many old families would be kept up without? Fortunately, however angry my uncle might be, he has no power to punish Arthur; at least it cannot but be a moderate punishment. So long as he has Oakley—"

"He has not Oakley, Cousin Bertie. I wish you would not always talk of the time when papa will be gone. We may all be gone before him for anything we know;" and once more she put out her two fingers under the folds of her warm jacket to avert the omen. The Rector caught the movement and laughed.

"You are superstitious, Lucy. Why do you make that mystic sign at me?"

"I am not superstitious—it is to avert superstition;" she said quickly, with an idea that she was giving a reason. "But

I don't like a conversation that is all occupied with what will happen when papa is ——, or that discusses my brother as if— You may think me fanciful if you please, but I do not like it. I should not talk about Uncle Anthony's—to you."

She would not say the words death or dying, but left them to the imagination.

"You may say whatever you please to me," said the Rector softly, with a smile, and so far as concerned *his* father's death anyone might have discussed it. General Curtis had not much to leave, it was not his end that would work any great change one way or other in the world. His sons would receive their pittance, and there would be no more about it. She might talk of it as long as she pleased, and the Rector's feelings would not be much affected. But this was not the impression that Hubert Curtis wished to produce upon his cousin. He meant to say *you* may say what you please—*you* are

privileged, there is nothing that I would not accept from *you*.

But by this time they had reached the end of the avenue. The Rectory was the nearest house. It was a very handsome red-brick house, not older than the days of Queen Anne, standing only a little way off the road, half concealed in its shrubberies, well-kept, graceful, and comfortable. The pediment of the front showed over the lower growth of trees, and was sheltered and embosomed in the loftier ones. A noble old cedar stretching its long level arms across the road stood close by the gate. All kinds of fine flowering shrubs were in clumps in front of the house: some shining in dark evergreen, and some rapidly dropping their many-coloured leaves. There was something in the shape of sculpture adorning the pediment, and the Oakley tigers ramped on the posts of the gate; while behind stretched a large enclosure, full, apparently, of fine trees. It was as good as many a squire's house in the country, one

of the very finest specimens extant of an English Rectory. At a distance of about a quarter of a mile lay the village, such a spruce and trim place as villages are which live in kindly neighbourship with a rich Lord of the Manor and a fastidious Rector—their gardens, their windows, everything was in good order. There were flowers even now, chrysanthemums and dahlias, and some pale monthly roses. The end nearest the Hall and the Rectory was a sort of square built on three sides. The houses were old, with high-pitched roofs, covered with those soft brown-red tiles upon which lichens grow, and nothing could be more picturesque. A row of little old almshouses, older than either Rectory or Hall, was on one side, on the other was the Exchange, the Regent Street of Oakley. Here stood the inn, a rustic country inn with a sign on a post in front of it, and the post-office, with Berlin wool patterns in its little projecting window, and the shop in which you could

buy everything. It was so civilized a place that in the post-office there was a little circulating library, chiefly of novels; and scarcely less innocent was the inn parlour where two papers were taken, and where the village men dropped in as into a club, to see if there was any news. The remains of an old cross stood in the centre of this little square. It was reduced to a mere stone post, with half illegible carvings, and in more modern days somebody had built a drinking-fountain close to it, taking advantage of the old well which had been there from time immemorial. The drinking-fountain was shabby, as drinking-fountains have a way of being, but when horses stopped to drink out of the trough, and a few people came with jugs of an afternoon for the water, which was quite famous for making tea, with the broken old stone of the cross standing up into the blue skies beyond them, it was a pleasant sight enough. Everything, however, was grey with the

November chill. Few people were out of doors, but the afternoon had begun to brighten through the haze, promising better weather.

"I am going to the almshouses," said Lucy, making a decided stop, in order to take leave of her companion.

"I will walk to the cross with you," he said. And as they came within reach of the village windows more than one good woman within, glad even of this mild incident to pass the afternoon, came and looked at them across the muslin blind, and decided that something would come o' that. "And I shouldn't wonder if it was soon," said the village dressmaker, getting up to look at the call of her assistant, "for one wedding brings another."

"Oh, is it true as it's nobody but a poor girl that young Squire has married?" asked the assistant, under her breath, who was young too, and pretty, and remembered that the young Squire had

looked in at the window more than once as he had passed. "It might have been *me!*" She said to herself.

"There's that overskirt to finish, Miss Cording," said the dressmaker peremptorily. She prided herself in allowing no nonsense to be talked among her young ladies. Lucy did not know of the eyes that were upon her, or of the guess in everybody's mind. She walked very sedately to the cross, and then turned round and bid her cousin goodbye.

"I have people to see in the almshouses, too," he said. "I will go on with you."

"I did not know you went there," said Lucy. She was better acquainted with the poor people than he was, and indeed did a curate's work, and saved (though without intending it) a great deal of trouble to the Rector.

"You make me out to be worse than I am," he said, with an uneasy flush upon his face. "I may not perhaps take

to the poor people as you do—I have not been brought up to it; but I am not such a stranger in the parish as you think."

"I did not think anything about it," said Lucy, calmly; and this perhaps he felt the hardest of all.

Sir John came strolling into his wife's sitting-room after these two young people had gone down the avenue. He was restless, and came in there three or four times a day for no reason at all, except the restlessness of a troubled mind. He went up to the window, near which she was sitting, to get the light on her work, for Lady Curtis was not so young as she had once been, and her eyes, as she said, were going. She had not had courage to go out and face the damp air and the long dreary avenue with Lucy. She sat there mournfully enough by herself, trying to think she was interested in her crewels. Sir John did not say anything when he first came in, but went up to the window,

and stared out with eyes that did not seem to see anything. But they did see something, for he said after a moment,

"Is that Bertie that has gone down the avenue with Lucy? What does she want with him?"

"Nothing," said Lady Curtis. "She was going to the village, and he was returning to the Rectory."

"What does he want with her then?" said Sir John, "you should not let her walk about the country with any stray man that may turn up."

"It is her cousin, John—surely she may walk down the avenue with her cousin—when they are both going the same way."

"Oh yes," he said; "surely she may, what harm can there be in it? Until you find out suddenly perhaps that another marriage has been concocted under your nose, and another of your children thrown herself away."

"Have you seen any signs of it?

Should you dislike it, John? I am so glad! I almost feared you were—favourable to him—thinking of something of the kind."

"I!" he went from the window to the fire, and propped himself up against the mantelpiece with his back to it. From thence he talked slowly, perorating at his ease, and it was so pleasant to him to have an audience, and to have attention, that a sense of relief and comfort, not to speak of warmth, stole into his whole being. "I don't like parsons," he said, "I never trust them—you can't tell what they're after. It may be your money for charities, or it may be your daughter; and you never know which it is. And Bertie's so much worse than an ordinary parson that he doesn't even pretend to like his trade. He wasn't brought up to it, not young enough. So he has his own vices to start with, and the parson vices plastered over them. I don't like your wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Perhaps we are hard upon him, John. Poor fellow, it was not his fault he was put into the Church; it is not his congenial sphere."

"He should have been on the turf," said Sir John. "If I had known the kind of fellow he was, notwithstanding the traditions of the family, he shouldn't have had the living; and if we don't mind he'll have our girl too."

"Oh, no!" said Lady Curtis. "I was half afraid you *wished* for it, and was grieved for your disappointment."

"Disappointment!" he echoed again, and then after a pause he said, earnestly, "My lady, there must be no nonsense about Lucy. There must be no second *fiasco* of a marriage. You are not a duenna, and I don't want you to behave as if she was not to be trusted; but, after all, what is Lucy but a girl, like others? She must be taken care of; there must be no nonsense about her. If Arthur had behaved as he ought, it might have been

different; but Arthur has been a fool, and there's an end of it, and that changes her position."

"John," said Lady Curtis, hastily, "you will do nothing without consideration? I am not defending Arthur, but you will not do anything without serious thought?"

"What do you suppose I can do?" he asked, with some bitterness. "Nothing, or next to nothing. Oh, no, he will have everything his own way. But Lucy's position is changed all the same. She is, as it were, the only one we have. If it were not that celibacy never answers, I would tie her up not to marry, at least, in our lifetime."

"Oh, John!" cried Lady Curtis, in the extremity of her surprise.

"Well, why not? It would be a great deal pleasanter for you and me. I hate a girl marrying, losing her head, as they all do, and forgetting herself for some poor creature of a man. Lord, if they knew

just what the men are that they take for something above the common! I don't think I could bear to see my Lucy philandering and going on with a fellow, probably not worth a word from her. But celibacy, I suppose, does not answer; at least, it is supposed not to answer, especially for women. A man may get on well enough."

"A great many women get on well enough; but you cannot wish it, John, surely you cannot wish it. Is it to secure a companion for us that you would have Lucy, poor child, give up her own life?"

"That is nonsense," said Sir John. "Life is something more than marriage. That is the folly of women. Nothing makes up to them for this one thing. They have got it into their heads that love—love and marrying—is all life is good for. Fiddlesticks! Look at all the men in the clubs. They are chiefly unmarried men, and they lead a pleasant

life enough. A married man, with all his cares, can't come up to them. They have a much jollier time of it than I have, for example."

"But Lucy—our Lucy! You would not like her to be like one of your old *roués* at the club!" cried Lady Curtis, half horrified, half laughing.

"They are not *roués;* that's another of your fancies. They are worthy old fellows, many of them with a great stake in the country. Now why, I say, mightn't a woman do just as well unmarried? There would be plenty for her to enjoy. If she hadn't her club, she would have society as much as she could set her face to; and she could travel, if she liked that, as much as any man, and see life; and she could do no end of good, if that was her turn. Look at Miss Coutts."

"And this is the life you would choose for Lucy!" cried her mother. "Are you out of your senses, John? No kind husband for her, like what you have been

to me; no children to climb about her—"

"Pshaw!" said Sir John. "As for the kind husband, that's one of your pretty speeches, my lady, and you may be laughing at me, for anything I know; and children—to treat her as Arthur has treated you and me! Did we ever refuse the fellow anything in reason? No, I don't say it would do, I only said I would tie her up if I could, if it had been practicable; and I believe it would have been a great blessing for all of us—for her too, if she could have thought so; but then I don't suppose she would have thought so," and, with a sigh, he walked away.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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